Campione! Volume 16

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These are novel illustrations that were included in "Campione! Volume 16".

カンピオーネ！ Campione XVI

英雄たちの鼓動

丈月 城
Illustration シコルスキー

スーパーダッシュ

Characters Introduction
主要登場人物

草薙護堂
高校1年生。
軍神ウルスラグナの権能を有するカンピオーネ。

エリカ・ブランデッリ
《赤銅黒十字》の魔術師。
自称、護堂の「愛人」。

方里谷祐理
霊視の力を持つ媛巫女。
護堂の「正妻」と称される。

リリアナ・クラニチャール
《青銅黒十字》の魔術師。
護堂の「騎士」を自任する。

清秋院恵那
当代随一とされる「太刀の媛巫女」。
護堂の「剣」として侍る。

サルバトーレ・ドニ
イタリア最強の騎士たる「剣の王」。

甘粕冬馬
正史編纂委員会のエージェント。

沙耶宮馨
正史編纂委員会東京分室室長。

装丁／川谷デザイン

た 9-16

カンピオーネ! XVI 英雄たちの鼓動

丈月 城

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草薙護堂は神殺しである。

魔王、囚われの身に!? 平和なクラスで起きた珍事件「囚われのカンピオーネ」、エリカと護堂のある夜の出来事「ローマの休日・深夜版」等短編を一挙収録! さらに古代ガリアから帰還した護堂たちが再び相見えるのは、かつて倒したはずの宿敵たちで…!? 封印されし「最後の王」をめぐる最終決戦の鼓動が、今聞こえはじめる……!!

Authors Introduction
著者紹介

丈月 城
新しい空気清浄機を導入したら、
我が家の快適度がぐんと上昇しました。
プラ●マク●スターは結構できる子です。

シコルスキー
神奈川県在住のイラストレーター。AB型。
ライトノベルやソーシャルゲームのお仕事を中心に
活動させてもらっています。
好きなものは猫と映画。

スーパーダッシュ文庫 丈月 城の本

カンピオーネ! 神はまつろわず
カンピオーネ! Ⅱ 魔王来臨
カンピオーネ! Ⅲ はじまりの物語
カンピオーネ! Ⅳ 英雄と王
カンピオーネ! Ⅴ 剣の巫女
カンピオーネ! Ⅵ 神山飛鳳
カンピオーネ! Ⅶ 斉天大聖
カンピオーネ! Ⅷ 受難の魔王たち
カンピオーネ! Ⅸ 女神再び
カンピオーネ! Ⅹ 槍の戦神
カンピオーネ! Ⅺ ふたつめの物語
カンピオーネ! Ⅻ かりそめの聖夜
カンピオーネ! XIII 南洋の姫神
カンピオーネ! XIV 八人目の神殺し
カンピオーネ! XV 女神の息子
カンピオーネ! XVI 英雄たちの鼓動

丈月 城

Illustration

シコルスキー

カンピオーネ！

英雄たちの鼓動

Campione XVI

護堂

アレッシア

エリカ

祐理

澤

明日香

宮間

「さぁ。どうだ、我が逆縁の担い手。草薙護堂よ」
アマゾネスの女王までしたがえて、パラス・アテナは高らかに告げる。
「これなる軍神たちに加えて、『風の王』も友の陣中に控えている。当代の神殺しどもへ宣戦を布告するにあたり、十分な戦力だとは言えまいか？」

「も、申し訳ありませんっ。
あなたを救助しやすいようにと思って、
水に入る前、とっさに脱いで
しまいました……」
リリアナは恥ずかしがって、
両腕でうすい胸を隠していた。
銀髪の女騎士は精一杯に身をすくませて、
護堂の目をやりすごそうとしていたのだが……。

Contents

目　次

第1話
魔王と騎士、現る
11

第2話
ローマの休日・深夜版
12

第3話
三人そろえば……？
60

第4話
囚われのカンピオーネ
79

第5話
うわさのカンピオーネ
101

第6話
余話・顕聖二郎真君
113

第7話
英雄たちの鼓動
206

丈月城

Illustration

シコルスキー

カンピオーネ！

英雄たちの鼓動

Campione XVI

カンピオーネ！16
お買い上げありがとうございます♪
しこる

Chapter 1 - Appearance of Devil King and Knight

【Excerpt from the book *Devil Kings*, authored by the 19th century Italian mage Alberto Rigano】

Upon each of those who have accomplished such a terrifying feat, I shall bestow the title "Campione."

Wise readers may express doubts regarding this title, possibly dismissing my records as exaggerations.

But allow me to emphasize once again.

Campiones are conquerors.

Because they are capable of slaughtering the gods of the heavens, thereby obtaining supreme power.

Campiones are kings.

Because they are able to rule anyone on Earth by wielding authorities usurped from the gods.

Campiones are devil kings.

Because no mortal can oppose their powers!

On a certain spring morning, the sky was bright and clear without a single cloud for miles.

The refreshingly cool blue sky of May stretched overhead to as far as the eye could see. Nevertheless, thirteen-year-old Alessia's little bosom was brimming with unease. In contrast to the weather, her mood was hardly cheerful.

"...If only things could settle down today."

She murmured to herself softly as she walked along the path through the fields towards the monastery.

Alessia lived in a remote village located within Italy's central region of Tuscany. Here, the inhabitants mostly made their living off agriculture and forestry. This place was simply a small village and not a tourist attraction.

Also, Alessia was just an ordinary middle school student living in this village... Well, not exactly.

She possessed a secret skill. Namely, "magic." This ominous skill was the ability she gradually acquired under the tutelage of an old monk who used to live in the monastery at the village entrance until he passed away a few months ago.

After the old man died, sweeping and cleaning this little ancient monastery became Alessia's daily chore.

She came before this Romanesque stone building, one that could have been built in the twelfth century. As she advanced towards the depths of the chapel, she muttered the reason why she was worried.

"...How is the situation underground? If only it would settle down..."

The mysterious old man who once lived here had secretly told her before. He claimed to be no ordinary monk but belonged to a knightly order that held mastery over rare magic. Furthermore, he even said that Alessia possessed the same talent as himself.

That was what he had said in the past when he taught Alessia basic magic.

"The holy sanctum dedicated to ancient deity's 'beast of strange forms'... This monastery was built to conceal its traces. As for this beast of strange forms, it might be a reference to a certain 'Goddess of Beasts' perhaps."

"Goddess of Beasts?"

"Yes. Given some incomprehensible opportunity, these [Heretic Gods] descend on the earth with alarming simplicity. And they bring disaster, causing great hardship to us humans."

These were the faithless words of an old man, one without any relatives to accompany his last and dying days.

Alessia recalled the incident as she ventured forward in trepidation.

Beneath her current position was the underground location where terrifying magical power could be sensed starting a week ago.

Hence, she naturally recalled what she heard about "gods." As well as the deceased old man's warning of the door "never to be opened no matter what." That door was concealed behind the statue of the Virgin Mary.

In a corner of the chapel was a statue of Mary which had been painted completely black for some reason.

Apparently, the wall behind the statue could be pushed and spun around to reach the deep space on the other side.

A week earlier, sensing strong magical power, Alessia had tried opening the door with trepidation.

...Behind the door was a flight of stairs that led underground. Reaching the bottom, she discovered a path leading to a natural cave.

She did not have the courage to continue. The endless black space felt terrifying. However, the main reason was because she heard the howls of wild beasts.

It sometimes sounded like the barking of dogs and the neighing of horses on other occasions.

As well as the chirping of birds, and the indiscernible cries of some kind of ferocious beast. However, she never heard the same sound twice...

That time, Alessia frantically ran up the steps and returned to the chapel—

In the past week, as the underground magical power gradually increased each passing day, her uneasiness rose accordingly. Then on this particular morning, Alessia felt extremely uncomfortable the instant she stepped into the chapel.

This was the result of being bathed in magical power more intense than she had ever felt before.

"Has a great god really descended...?"

Just as Alessia's heart was filled with worry and she was about to murmur again.

Clang! Clang! A metallic impact could be heard from above the ceiling. This was the result of [Alarm] magic being triggered.

This took effect whenever a being above a certain threshold of magical power approached the monastery.

This was the first time for Alessia to hear this sound.

It was magic that she had cast as a precaution against outside intruders. Nevertheless, she was delighted instead. Although she did not know why they had come, at least a great and powerful mage must have entered the area. This could very well be her chance to seek counsel regarding the deity who was about to awaken underground!

Alessia focused her magical sensing to read the danger report provided by the [Alarm] spell.

Extraordinarily powerful—No good, that "excessively powerful " being seemed to be moving along the river behind the mountain. Alessia immediately rushed outside, hoping to catch the presence before it left.

On this cool and refreshing spring morning, the rosy clouds of May could be seen floating slowly up in the sky above.

However, Kusanagi Godou's current mood had nothing to do with cool and refreshing.

This was only natural. Just earlier, he had spent the entire night fighting some monster whose appearance he could not see. In the end, he was swept into the river and had been clinging onto driftwood while he floated for the past dozens of minutes.

Only now did he manage to get ashore with great difficulty.

However, Godou was hurt. His body was covered with burns and his back had suffered a deep slashing wound. He was covered with bruises all over. Nevertheless, these painful sensations gave him a sort of pleasure of being alive.

"It feels... Feels like I seem to be gradually getting used to this kind of stuff..."

" 'Seem to be' is completely redundant, Godou. You are fully accustomed to this sort of adventure already."

This "partner" declared with effortless certainty towards Godou as he endured his pain.

Erica Blandelli. The beautiful girl who possessed a head of reddish lustrous blonde hair.

However, her beauty was not only based on her physical appearance, for Erica's aura of ambition and intellect that exuded from her entire being was the major contributor to the deep impression of glamor she left on others.

"Clearly so little time has passed since you defeated Verethragna on the island of Sardinia... Yet in all aspects you are already a Devil King who can stand in his own right. This I can guarantee completely."

"That kind of guarantee is completely unnecessary... Well, anyway."

Sitting quietly on the riverbank from exhaustion, Godou spoke up.

"Thank you for your help this time as well. Thanks."

After the battle against the Persian Warlord Verethragna and becoming a "Campione," all sorts of pandemonium broke loose one after another.

After that, he had fought the ancient Mediterranean sky god Melqart at the island of Sicily, and also arrived at Milan to battle his fellow Campione, Salvatore Doni, the sword genius...

The only reason Godou was able to overcome all of these deadly challenges, was due to Erica's aid and support.

...Well, this time, it all started from her "let's go check out this giant eel monster that has been sighted in Tuscany" suggestion. She was the true culprit who proposed and forced him to take on this venture.

But in spite of everything, her being his savior remained as unchangeable fact.

Not only was Godou completely wet from being carried by the river current, Erica was also fully drenched. This was because his " partner" had jumped into the river in order to pull Godou back ashore. For the sake of saving Godou, she had done so without any hesitation.

The river flowing before them was the Arno.

It was said to be a great river traversing the region of Tuscany from east to west. However, due to the current mountainous location, the river was not particularly wide. Such was the scenery belonging to this slightly bigger than average river.

"This river apparently passes through Florence, right?"

"Yes. Continuing along downstream should reach the city of lilies, Florence. If you go further along the river, you will reach Pisa, famous for its leaning tower. Beyond that, the river flows into the Tyrrhenian Sea."

The ones Erica listed out were the most famous cities located in the region of Tuscany.

Hearing these familiar geographical names, Godou muttered with heartfelt feeling.

"How fortunate that I didn't have to take a river tour through all those places..."

"But precisely because you are Godou, wouldn't it be most unbecoming to die a death of drowning?"

Completely drenched, Erica bore a serious expression. She did not seem like she was joking.

Godou felt slightly displeased. Even though he believed that his body was "perhaps" rather excessive in survival ability, at least that kind of unreasonable result should not happen. Probably...

Feeling the chilly air against his completely drenched body, Godou shuddered.

His strength was being drained. He seemed to have lost too much blood and energy from drifting in the river with all his injuries. Seeing his condition, Erica smiled with a chuckle. Rather than taking sadistic pleasure in Godou's misfortune, it was probably the opposite.

Though Godou figured out what she was thinking, it was already too late.

In the next instant, Erica had already swiftly approached and embraced Godou in her arms.

"Hoho. Now first we must heal your wounds. Accept this obediently."

Erica displayed a mesmerizing smile towards Godou as she whispered softly. She drew her face extremely near.

Had she gone another 10cm or so, their faces would probably have stuck tightly together.

"No, don't. After all, my body should heal on its own!"

Kusanagi Godou's body had already become one that "could not die easily."

Although this was completely beyond common logic, even if he suffered a sufficiently severe injury, a nap was probably not enough to heal things completely.

"So anyway, healing isn't completely pointless, you know?"

Erica smiled innocently and adorably as she pressed her lips close to Godou's face.

"Currently, you should recover your wounds as quickly as possible and dry your clothes. For this purpose, all effort must be spent. Because I am your lover who stands as Kusanagi Godou's knight... Even offering you my lips is nothing particularly out of the ordinary."

"T-That is exactly the problem!"

Like that supernatural ability to survive, this was also part of the new constitution Godou had obtained.

Namely, *absolute resistance to magic*. Once reborn as a Campione, a person became immune to all magic, rendering it ineffective.

This applied indiscriminately towards all magic, whether friendly or hostile.

"However, as long as it is through oral intake, magic can still be applied to you. Hoho, I really must express my gratitude towards the existence of such a loophole. Thanks to that, not only can I help Godou but I can also enjoy the pleasure of kissing you."

With such a seductive tone of voice, Erica took Godou's lips.

Her sweet kiss sealing his mouth, Godou began to feel dizzy. Those soft lips of hers felt pleasurable beyond belief, plunging one into ecstasy. Erica began with light pecks on Godou's lips then proceeded to kiss him as if trying to envelope his entire mouth.

Then using her moist lips to caress Godou's lips, she slipped her tongue inside.

Using her tongue to tie down Godou's, the two tongues entangled with each other. Tongue and tongue were wrapped around each other in separable intimate contact.

With great intensity of emotion, Erica opened her lips and carefully savored the taste of Godou's mouth. With passionate Latin style, she sought Godou's tongue, boldly licking with her own.

Then Godou felt [Recovery] magic being poured forth from her mouth, easing away his pain.

"Hey Erica. My wounds are already healed, isn't it time to stop... "

However, the blonde beauty continued to lick his lips, completely unconcerned.

"Very well. The kiss just now was to heal your wounds. From this point onwards, the kissing is purely to enjoy the pleasure of making out with you, the task of affirming our love."

Erica declared thus.

Obviously, she did not move her lips away. She was conversing with Godou in whispers as she kissed him.

...In the end, this kiss persisted for another five minutes until Erica finally released her lips. However, the reason was not because she was tired of kissing.

"Time to warm our bodies. I will start a fire now."

Standing on the riverside in drenched clothes, both of them were feeling quite a chill.

Feeling embarrassed, Godou silently nodded once emphatically as if he was unable to stare Erica in the face.

The two of them had met for the first time towards the south of the Italian peninsula, on the Mediterranean island of Sardinia.

While they were running around all over that island, Erica's attitude towards Godou had been rather unfriendly.

However, after enduring many desperate trials together, before they knew it, Erica had changed to the point that she could openly declare her "love" to Godou.

Not only verbally, but also in attitude and behavior. Even to the point of engaging in this sort of passionate kissing...

"Hey Godou, now that the issues after the battle have all been handled, why don't we spend some private time together to make some sweet and loving memories?"

Beyond that, she even made this request. Godou frantically asked:

"Uh, well, what?"

"Sweet and loving memories. I've already spoken to Uncle. Who knows if it would be a few months or years down the road, but I do intend to have children with you for sure, Godou, so we have to coordinate."

"Children—!"

"I have no intention to rush, but this is inevitable. You should prepare yourself beforehand accordingly."

Ignoring Godou's dumbfounded surprise, Erica snapped her fingers loudly.

A mass of flames suddenly ignited before their eyes. This was apparently magic for starting a fire instantly.

"How convenient..."

Godou calmed his emotions and walked near the fire. Erica did the same.

The two gathered around the bonfire, warming their cold bodies. But two minutes later, Godou began to scream.

"Hey, what the heck! What on earth are you doing!?"

Erica was slowly removing her wet clothing before the fire.

"What are you talking about, Godou? It's not like I can continue wearing these clothes like this, right?"

"True, you have a point! But I'm right here—a man is present, you know!?"

"Back on the island of Sicily, haven't you seen the naked body of Erica Blandelli, mine, completely already? By this point, what do you have to be concerned about?"

With a seductive smile, Erica boldly displayed her figure before Godou.

The only articles of clothing on her body were her red bra and underwear.

Her pale and pristine complexion was a dizzying sight. Furthermore, more than anything else, the perfect proportions of her figure were greatly troubling to Godou. Despite Erica's slender build, her body was voluptuous and full in all the right places yet slender and taut where appropriate.

The sight of this perfect body that would put a magazine model to shame sent Godou into a state of panic.

Seeing Godou in such a state, Erica displayed a ladylike smile, full of open-minded acceptance. Nevertheless, this sort of mischievousness and broadminded personality were indeed quite attractive—

"Godou, shouldn't you take that off as well? Aren't you cold wearing it?"

"Feeling cold is fine!"

Even though Godou's upper torso was bare, he kept his jeans on .

This was because he was mindful of the presence of the woman before him. But to his surprise, she acted in such a manner. Godou's inner world was turned upside down in complete turmoil , his heart beating rapidly out of control.

But immediately...

Erica suddenly tensed her facial expression and performed [Summoning] magic.

This was a spell for summoning a personal object from a certain location. What she summoned was a garment that resembled a short cape. This cape was striped with the red and black colors of rossonero. Wrapping it around her shoulders, Erica covered her upper torso.

Godou also prepared his stance.

Probably, Erica was trying to prevent her bare body from being seen by someone apart from Godou. That was why she covered up ? In other words, someone was probably approaching right now.

As a master swordsman in addition to being a mage, did she hear the sound of footsteps or sense someone's presence?

After a while, a girl came running. She appeared to be twelve or thirteen years old or so, and gave off quite a cute impression. As soon as she saw the fire Erica had lit, she jumped in surprise.

"Magical flames? Are you two users of magic!?"

This was the beginning of a "little commotion" in which Kusanagi Godou was caught up in.

"In other words, Alessia, you were taught by a mage descended from the lineages of the Templar Knights and he lived in this monastery."

The stone-built ancient monastery. Thus spoke Erica in the front yard.

Godou and Erica were already dressed in clothes that Alessia had taken from her own home for them. After that, they had traveled from the river Arno over to this monastery.

"Templar Knights...?"

"It refers to medieval European knights and monks who mastered swordsmanship and magic. Both your master and I are their descendants. Hoho, it's fine if you don't understand yet."

Erica smiled as Alessia displayed complete surprise.

Along the way here, the blonde beauty had conversed with the young girl in a gentle manner, successfully finding out from the girl "how she learned magic."

There was also a reason why they had come here with Alessia. At the riverside just now, she had made a request.

'Please! If it is not too much trouble, could you come over and let me discuss something with you!? It is very important!'

It seemed to be a case involving magic. In order to thank her for the favor of lending the clothes, Godou and Erica had come to this place.

"Then what did you want to discuss? But let me first say I have no idea about stuff like incantations and magic. On the other hand, this Erica here is an expert so I'm sure she can help you."

Erica nodded as if saying "Well, no problem" in response to Godou.

Then Alessia spoke with an awkward expression—

"Yeah. In actual fact, there is a possibility that a deity is about to wake up underground below this monastery..."

A shocking report. Erica went "well" and stared with widened eyes as she smiled slightly wryly.

On the other hand, Godou simply emotionlessly went "Eh" in a mutter.

Just a few hours earlier, he had been fighting against what was known as a deity's servant...

Seeing him like this, Erica burst out into laughter beside him. Godou was slightly miffed by her frivolous attitude. In stark contrast to the reactions of her elders, Alessia remained clueless.

Erica began an investigation that concluded roughly two hours later.

First, she browsed through the documents and resources left behind by the deceased monk. Then she went to the chapel and gazed at the statue of the Virgin Mary that was painted black.

Finally, she opened the door hidden behind the statue of Mary and went underground. Then ten minutes went by.

Seeing Erica return, Godou asked her casually:

"Then how is it? Is there really a god down below?"

"In terms of the verdict, there is none."

Hearing her say so, Alessia's eyes lit up with hope, but Godou knew it was not so simple.

He noticed that Erica still had more to say.

"Even though there is no deity here, there is a servant—a divine beast—in the process of awakening. In roughly three or four days, it will awaken completely and start being active."

"Another one!"

The monsters known as "divine beasts" were sacred creatures that served gods. Just a few hours earlier, Godou was fighting one of them. Hearing this explanation, Alessia leaned towards Erica.

"Are the servants of the great gods really dangerous!?"

"Yes. The divine beast sleeping underground is more than likely the underling of Artemis, the goddess of the moon and the land, the queen of the beasts. If it awakens, let alone this village, it would not be ridiculous for the entire region of Tuscany to be destroyed."

Erica glanced at Godou's side profile as she spoke.

Rather than informing the girl, she was trying to make Godou understand.

"Destroy—!?"

Alessia gulped. Meanwhile, Godou was gnashing his teeth.

If that was the case, a fight was unavoidable after all... With such despair, he spoke to Alessia.

"C-Could you go out and leave us for a bit? I have to hold a strategy conference with Erica."

"This is what's known as an adult conversation."

Erica added. To think she would use such a suggestive description.

Godou glared at her but Erica smiled in feigned ignorance.

Once the two of them were the only ones remaining in the ancient chapel, Erica spoke with great delight:

"Hoho. Fate is surely working hard to solidify the love between Godou and me. Well then, let's enjoy another passionate kiss?"

"T-That kind of fate, who could endure such a thing!"

"Well, you can also call it simple luck. Doesn't change the fact that we have to kiss."

Erica smiled with a chuckle as Godou hung his head.

"The god you defeated on the island of Sardinia was the ancient Persian Warlord Verethragna."

Ignoring Godou in his dejection, the blonde beauty spoke melodiously as if singing a song.

"As the strongest of the strong, he is the god of victory who defeats all enemies. His trump card is the 'brilliant golden sword.' Kusanagi Godou has already usurped that sword..."

The term Campione referred to Devil Kings, warriors who had usurped the authorities of the gods they had slain. Namely, monsters who transcended mankind's limits as humans who fought gods.

"For beings on the level of underlings that serve gods, a single strike of the golden sword would be enough to vanquish them. However, you are unable to use that sword so easily."

Erica murmured as she dragged her knees while she leaned close.

Godou's sense of morality was pleading with him to move away . But it was futile.

At this moment, Godou was sitting on a bench in the chapel. Erica was sitting on his knees and leaning tightly against him.

Her skin felt so warm and tender, with an amazing sense of substance and elasticity. These two sensations were rapidly increasing.

Stimulated by such tactile sensations and an appropriate sense of weight, Godou could feel a sense of pleasure and rising climax rushing through his entire body.

Then Erica smiled joyfully and lightly kissed Godou on the cheek, bringing her lips near his ear.

"In order to forge the sword's blade, you require detailed knowledge about the enemy deity. Knowledge and wisdom the normal Japanese student, Kusanagi Godou, is not equipped with. Knowledge that you may not master even with years of study..."

Erica spoke softly. Her voice was so tempting and seductive.

While treating his wounds just now, she had forcefully taken Godou's lips. But this time was different. She had no intention of doing the same.

She was waiting. This time, she was enticing Godou to issue a request to her on his own.

"However, if a mage such as I were to use the spell of [Instruction], the required knowledge can be transmitted to you instantly. Although it is temporary knowledge that only lasts for a day or so, for the purposes of ending a battle it is quite enough, right?"

Kiss. Erica lightly made contact with Godou's earlobe using her lips.

"Hey Godou, as one of the Campiones, you are a Devil King who fights gods on behalf of humanity. I will not make irresponsible remarks regarding your fights, so please issue your orders. Say it, 'Transmit knowledge to me, and offer your lips to me, Kusanagi Godou.' "

Based on this line of thinking, there was more or less a sense of tyrannical behavior, and yet she voiced it with such a straight face.

But these tiny whispers lit up a roaring flame in Godou's heart.

Currently there was a divine servant that was about to rampage . And the only one who could oppose it at this moment was himself alone. Erica had spelled things out to this point. As if reluctant to fall to her charms, Godou was now in a struggling state on the verge of being conquered.

Given such sufficient conditions, there was no other recourse but to give in to his fate—

"...P-Please. Teach me everything I need to know."

Hearing this, a flourishing smile appeared on Erica's face like a blooming flower.

Without saying a word, she kissed Godou's lips. She held still, their lips pressed together for ten-odd seconds. Then Erica slowly opened her lips and spoke softly:

"Of course. Since it is for your victory, I will offer everything of mine no matter how much it would take. No matter how many times, I will forge the sword for you, Godou!"

Erica was smiling with a rapturous gaze.

It was a smiling face of happiness that was completely devoid of her usual glamor and devilish mischief.

"Hoho. I knew it, compared to kissing you on my own accord, kissing you by your request feels very different. I enjoy both regardless, but being able to indulge in both kinds today is truly wonderful."

Erica embraced Godou tightly as she spoke.

Then the two of them gazed silently into each other's eyes. Once again their lips pressed together and they kissed each other repeatedly in turn.

"Artemis is the great mother earth goddess who rules over life and death. The goddess of the hunt. Not only does she hunt prey, but she is also the mistress worshiped by the myriad beasts and birds of the forest, with the bear as the foremost..."

As she kissed, Erica softly recounted knowledge about the goddess.

"As a master of transformation, she has the ability to take on the forms of all sorts of beasts. Furthermore, her body possesses hundreds of breasts. This stands as a symbol of Artemis as the

mother of life. Understand? This goddess is the mother of all creatures, yet at the same time, she is also the slaughterer who hunts down the life she nurtured..."

As Godou heard these words through his ears, images of the earth mother goddess Artemis were also transmitted to his mind.

Such were the effects of the [Instruction] magic used by Erica.

What occurred after that could hardly be called a battle.

Because Godou simply went underground, advancing to the depths of the cave and destroyed the divine beast of indeterminate form with a mere "light stab with the sword."

The divine beast sleeping underground was rather terrifying.

Most of its body consisted of a gray slime. An amorphous and viscous fluid. This slime was continuously rising from all over the ground. The liquid appeared to be boiling with what resembled bubbles popping all over its uneven surface.

Furthermore, those bulging body parts transformed themselves into the forms of all sorts of beasts and birds.

Bears, dogs, cows, deer, horses, pigs, boars, sheep, goats, owls, bees... etc. These transformations occurred at the same time at various places on the body. Simply watching the sight was disgusting enough to lose one's appetite.

After destroying this thing, Godou returned to the surface with Erica.

"I-I never knew even those kinds of things can be a divine servant..."

"Compared to ones holding exceptionally beautiful forms, the servants of the gods are more commonly ugly to a sublime level. This happens to be a case of the latter."

Even when giving such a description, Erica showed an uncharacteristically disgusted expression.

In any case, the job was done and the pair returned to the outside of the monastery to meet up with Alessia.

"Thank you for your patience. The underground divine beast has been destroyed by Kusanagi Godou here."

"Destroyed!?"

Alessia's expression seemed to be saying "Unbelievable!" as she looked at Godou.

She was trying to articulate such feelings into words. Just as Alessia was about to speak, Erica smiled mischievously and placed her index finger on her lips.

"Just a friendly warning, suspicions regarding a Campione—the power to slay a god—cannot be uttered in any situation. That is, if you wish to continue surviving in the world of magic."

Taking Godou's arm, the blonde beauty declared as if she was taking pride in her lover's power.

"They are conquerors, Devil Kings, royalty as well as warriors. Bearers of absolute strength who fight on humanity's behalf when [Heretic Gods] bring disaster to the earth. Though they look no different from us humans in appearance, their bodies are actually monsters completely removed from humans!"

"W-Who the heck are you calling a monster!"

"Of course it's you, Kusanagi Godou. Even for an incident like this, it would take dozens of magi, risking their lives in a desperate struggle to seal away the divine beast in a massive severe crisis, you know?"

Casually ignoring Godou's protest, Erica winked at the young girl.

"In the near future, you will take pride in the fact that you have encountered us. One day, the world of magic will tremble before the great name of the seventh Campione, Kusanagi Godou. As well as his premier knight, Erica Blandelli. Because you have met these two!"

Just as Erica predicted at the time, the pair continued to take part in numerous victories henceforth.

Rather than a heroic legend, this particular little interlude could be considered as more of an insignificant and easy favor.

Chapter 2 - Roman Holiday, Late Night Edition

After Kusanagi Godou finished taking part in the imposed duel Erica had invited him to at the ancient capital of Rome, it was night time.

Surviving a deadly crisis as usual, Godou ended up causing severe damage to the ancient battlegrounds—the Colosseum.

But in any case, the battle that was full of all sorts of dangers finally concluded.

Godou departed from the tragic(?) scene of the Colosseum and parted with the three association representatives who acted as witnesses to the duel.

Next he returned to the hotel. After a bath, he would go to bed immediately. That was what Godou had decided.

Then after a good night's rest, he was going to carefully reflect on tonight's incident in the morning. In order not to make "this kind" of mistake ever again...

Whenever he turned his gaze in the direction of the Colosseum, the terrible result of his "moment of carelessness" would enter his view.

With a great sense of shame, Godou deeply regretted his actions .

The sounds of police and firefighting sirens could be heard coming from the direction of the Colosseum. This noise caused Godou to be assaulted by further reprimands from his conscience.

In spite of all this, Erica looked rather delighted as she walked beside him.

"Hoho. Tonight's duel has completely publicized the mighty name of Kusanagi Godou. This is the result of various preparations readied beforehand."

Erica explained as she strolled along the late night Roman city streets, prompting great surprise in Godou.

"W-What do you mean by preparations?"

"Hmm. Basically the three VIPs you met at the duel just now. Inviting all three of them certainly took substantial effort. Although there was a suitable excuse, they are rather busy people. In actual fact, I also invited three additional leaders, but they were unable to attend due to scheduling conflicts."

"You expressly prepared that much for the sake of letting others witness my power?"

Godou frowned.

"Why would you do such a thing? There's no need to gather all those people for a person like me, right?"

"Don't be nonsensical. In the world of magic, did you know that there is no event more suspenseful than the birth of a Devil King? Sending invitations out would actually exhibit our congeniality instead."

Erica listed out the seven prestigious magic associations recognized in Italy.

The three witnesses of tonight's duel belonged to the [Olden Dame], the [Female Wolf] and the [Capital of Lilies] respectively. In addition, there were the [Bronze Black Cross], the [Eagle of the Blue Sky] and [Aegis].

"Last but not least is my [Copper Black Cross]. Godou, you've already met the commander-in-chief of the association I belong to, my uncle—Paolo Blandelli. Hence, tonight was an opportunity for the other six associations to send representatives to have an audience with the seventh Campione."

Godou never expected that meeting those witnesses actually held such significance—

Realizing the surreal happenings surrounding him, Godou sighed.

"However, Godou, you performed even better than expected. Not only did you show off that level of destructive power to the representatives of the three prestigious associations, you even completely silenced their doubts on whether you were a fake or not."

"I-I wasn't showing off, I simply went too far in a moment of carelessness!"

"It doesn't matter which. What's important is the result. Hoho, let us raise a glass to toast and celebrate tonight."

"Why do we need to toast!?"

"Tonight commemorates Kusanagi Godou's first appearance on the European stage."

Informed by Erica with complete nonchalance, Godou was greatly shocked.

"In actual fact, I prepared a camera beforehand. Godou, your destruction of the Colosseum just now was recorded on video. Currently, the video is being prepared for broadcasting to those involved in the magic world all over Europe. The three VIPs you met have already become witnesses, so the great name of Kusanagi Godou will spread to all the corners of the European world of magic within days."

To think she had prepared things to such an extent. Godou's mood was instantly down in the deeps.

Seeing his reaction, Erica chuckled and displayed a devil's smile .

"Stop making that kind of face, stick your chest out. You currently don't look like a god-slayer at all. Do know that your status will keep rising from now on as the Devil King."

"I have no wish to possess this kind of title that cannot be written on resumes. Neither do I want to raise my status in this manner!"

Objecting loudly, Godou yawned.

It was now late at night. Perhaps due to fatigue from the whole mess at the Colosseum or jet lag, Godou was struck with sleepiness all of a sudden. Getting some rest as early as possible seemed like a good idea.

"In any case, let's hurry back to the hotel for some rest. It's so late already."

Godou had heard earlier that Erica had prepared a place to stay.

Hence he proposed they head back. However, the girl in his company replied:

"That's right, we must open a bottle of wine or champagne to toast and celebrate properly together. Then after that, we should slowly descend upon the bed, to affirm our love for each other."

"W-Wait a minute. Your proposed schedule is clearly very unusual."

Godou was already dead tired. Why did he still need to deal with and retort against such ridiculous matters?

Feeling that life was very unreasonable, Godou continued:

"Aside from the fact that minors like us should not be drinking, spending a night together in the same room on the same bed is even more inappropriate!"

Besides, affirming each other's love or anything of that sort would be even more ridiculous.

As a man, Godou resolutely asserted his refusal and made a clear statement. However, Erica rolled her eyes at him and retorted calmly.

"Say, Godou. What you said just now is quite incorrect... Haven't we already experienced all of it before? It won't be the first time now, right?"

"Uh."

Godou could say nothing in response. Erica continued to list things out:

"We've already drank alcohol together before and spent the night under the same roof. Sleeping in the same bed through the night until morning has happened more than once. We have even bathed together, baring our bodies to each other without reserve..."

Finally, Erica added:

"Besides, we have already reached legal drinking age in Italy."

Drinking laws in Italy were different from Japan's. In this country, the legal drinking age was sixteen.

Having passed both their birthdays, Godou and Erica already fulfilled the required age.

Godou was frozen from a lack of grounds to object. On the other hand, Erica went "What a troublesome guy" as she shrugged, a wry smile appearing on the corners of her lips.

"Godou, although trying to correct your failure to read the mood can provide some hard-sought amusement, it's no fun if it gets too excessive. Let me forgive you on this point for now. Love cannot be cultivated without full consent from both sides."

"I-I see."

"Yes. Because even though you declare unwillingness, once your mood is roused sufficiently, even I would find it difficult to stop you."

"....."

"I really hope you can express your gratitude properly for the fact that I, Erica Blandelli, am a woman with such great tolerance."

Godou fell into a depressed silence.

He mourned for his inability to refute any of her words.

"Nevertheless, simply tolerating is no fun at all. That would be totally not my style."

The blonde beauty suddenly displayed a malevolent smile.

"Hey Godou, if you want to return to the hotel to sleep, give me a goodnight kiss."

"W-What did you say about a goodnight whatever?"

"A kiss. On the cheek is okay, though of course, the lips are fine too. If you do that, I will take you to the hotel."

Only now did Godou realize, he had no idea where the hotel was located. Without Erica to lead the way, he would not be able to find it so easily. However.

"D-Doesn't matter. It's not like I must stay at a hotel."

Godou immediately refused her demand.

"I just need to find shelter somewhere, or even spend the night outdoors. Or simply walk outside the whole night like this. I'm not going to kiss you so rashly ever again!"

Were he in Japan, there would be businesses running twenty-four hours a day such as family restaurants, sauna establishments or manga cafes. However, the ancient capital of Rome did not offer these kinds of shops.

But how could he back down simply due to this level of setback ? Godou declared his determination.

"I really think that kind of behavior is too soon for me!"

"Speaking from the one who has engaged in passionate kisses with me numerous times. Oh well, once you're out of options, you'll have no choice but to kiss me in the end."

Erica shrugged lightly.

"Godou, the way you're acting is just as meaningless as an old smoker declaring he'll quit smoking. 'If only I could do it' declarations imply that you wish to keep reminding yourself, but are doomed to failure every time."

"Hmm..."

"However, if you really want to try it, that's fine too. I will accompany you."

A devil's smile flashed across the blonde beauty's lips once more.

"Let us take a stroll on the streets of Rome. But you'll probably fall asleep half way due to exhaustion? If that happens, I'll carry you to the hotel room to take care of you tenderly. Then we'll spend some sweet time together before dawn? Hoho, it'll be fun."

"It's true that I'm very tired, but I will find a way to endure the whole night."

Godou contradicted Erica's speculation that was delivered as if the future was already set.

"You should know quite well, I have a lot of physical stamina."

"Yes. I know very well that you are ridiculously strong, Godou. At the same time, you are a rather careless person who leaves many openings. Given an entire night, I should be able to find a way."

"Find a way?"

"To trick you into drinking a drugged beverage to render you temporarily unconscious. It seems like I should be able to seize an opportunity to have you bound and restrained, then get a car to transport you back to the hotel... See!"

"Stop going 'See!' That's blatant kidnapping!"

Godou chastised Erica who explained her plan with an adorable expression.

"Even for me, I have no wish to go that far. However, if you'll simply ignore my little request, Godou, it can't be helped. Girls in love are liable to do anything when push comes to shove, so be careful."

The self-proclaimed girl in love said something unsettling with a joking tone of voice.

"Besides, a goodnight kiss is something even a child could do. If that's the case, what's the matter? I hope you can show me more generosity than that."

"Uh..."

Godou agreed that this description could be considered "proper ." Nevertheless, he remained at a loss for words.

Seeing him like that, Erica smiled with a chuckle.

"So, let me repeat my request again. Please bestow upon me a goodnight greeting in a manner of your choosing. Of course, a kiss on the lips is what I would like the most, but even one on the cheek is fine."

"~~~~"

A light peck on the cheek was all it would take.

Be that as it may, Godou still felt troubled due to her urging. This was unlike the deep and lengthy "ritual" kissing they engaged in normally. Perhaps it could even be done with a casual mood. However—

"I-I need to prepare myself mentally, so give me some time!"

Words of a final last ditch struggle.

The city streets of Rome were silent.

It was already past 2am. Unlike Japan where twenty-four hour businesses were found all over the place, not a single shop remained open at this time. Furthermore, street lighting was much less common than in Japan.

Godou and Erica strolled along these dim European streets at night.

Walking in front was Erica who led the way to the hotel. Godou followed a step behind her. Traveling by car would be the normal course of action in this situation, but in order to buy time to " prepare himself mentally" they chose this inefficient means of movement.

"Oh, wouldn't it be nice to get Arianna to drive the car here to take us somewhere? Meanwhile, you'll finish preparing yourself mentally, Godou."

"That's not fair for Anna-san, definitely don't do that..."

Erica's assistant and maid, Miss Arianna Arialdi, commonly called Anna.

Godou answered Erica because the mistress brought up her name. Normally, it was already bedtime. Godou would feel bad about rousing someone up from sleep at this time of the night.

"No problem. I have already instructed her to remain on standby until we return to the hotel. Riding in Arianna's car to race across the late night highway could turn out to be a rather interesting experience. Not too long ago, she gave me a ride to watch the ocean at night, together with Lily—a female friend of mine."

"You allowed someone who drives like that to get on the highway!?"

Arianna-san's driving skills were somewhat dangerous. Godou had already experienced it during the daytime.

Although Erica had said something like 'very incredibly, Arianna has never had an accident,' Godou definitely could not bank on such hopes again in the future.

Godou was astounded that she would do something so ridiculous.

"I always felt that it would be a totally new experience, and the result was exactly as predicted. The feeling of sweaty hands and even a frozen spine could be savored fully. This is probably what it means to experience a so-called spectacular scene..."

"Of course. The danger level is like riding a roller coaster without any safety measures at all!"

In the end, the joyride suggestion was abandoned and the two continued their way through the night.

While walking, they sometimes engaged in idle chatter and there were times when they walked in silence.

Godou felt rather incredible, to think he would be spending time with Erica like this.

Being together with her was not unpleasant. Even when there was nothing to say, it did not feel especially noticeable. Conversely , even after he noticed, it did not feel awkward at all.

The feeling was like being with family or very close male friends.

But to Godou, Erica was still a member of the opposite gender after all. Among the people he knew, she was the most gorgeous and attractive girl. Aware of the existence of this beauty beside him, Godou felt his heart beginning to race.

Nevertheless, it was unbelievable that he could get along with her so casually.

For Godou who was not used to getting along with girls, this was unprecedented.

However, that was how it was.

If Erica did not force kisses on him teasingly, then Godou would consider her a girl he could get along with open arms more than anyone else...

But clearly she was a mischievous woman who resembled the devil.

"What's up with that shop?"

Along the way, Godou discovered a shop with all the lights on.

An eatery with a red themed decor—It appeared to be a Chinese restaurant.

The current time was late at night. This was an ordinary part of town rather than a bustling commercial zone.

In spite of all that, this shop was still open this late.

"What amazing devotion to work. Even as a shop in Italy."

Godou could not help but offer praise.

As a Japanese, he was quite taken aback by unfamiliar occurrences in southern Europe, Italy included, such as "shops in the streets were closed on Sundays," "open twenty-four hours a day, what's that?" or "the summer vacation lasted a full month."

He had even heard of office workers who would "go home for lunch with their family then take a nice nap afterwards."

Naturally, the Italian girl offered her own comments on Godou's Japanese perspective.

"Godou, forgive me for being frank, but being hardworking is not necessarily a virtue."

Wagging her index finger from side to side, Erica explained with an air of superiority.

"The important thing is the quality of labor, not volume. Efficiency and results. Even if twenty hours out of a day's twenty four were spent on entertainment, it's fine so long as sufficient results are produced."

"But I think the usual behavior is also very important..."

Godou objected to the concept of nobility's labor presented from Erica's arrogant perspective.

"Besides, rather than spending so much leisure on having fun, I'd feel better if I used it productively to do work."

"You see, this is the rumored wisdom of Japanese businessmen. A person's talent and ability can be judged by how much leisure they can afford to spend on meaningful matters of elegance."

The opinions of the serious Japanese man and the free-spirited Italian beauty were akin to parallel lines that never intersected.

The intense fragrance of sesame oil wafted out of the Chinese restaurant.

"...Let's enter?"

"...Coming from you, that counts as a good suggestion."

After the exertion from the duel earlier as well as all the walking through the night, Godou was feeling a bit hungry.

The two of them casually established a Japanese-Italian truce and entered the shop.

Godou attempted to inquire about the closing time from the Chinese restaurant staff who happened to be at the door. The answer he got was half past four.

"Eh, that's almost until dawn!?"

Even though it was not open for the full twenty-four hours, there was not much difference. This was virtually the same as Japanese ramen specialty stores.

Perhaps in a metropolis like Rome the Eternal City, there was demand for this sort of hours. As Godou felt impressed, the server passed in front of Godou.

He was carrying in his hand a large plate of Chinese buns.

Seeing this, Erica seemed to have gotten an idea. She began conversing with the store employee who had answered Godou's question.

Then ten minutes passed—

After leaving the shop, Godou and Erica continued to stroll through the streets at night. Godou carried a large paper bag in his hands, filled with quite a few Chinese buns. These hot buns were freshly steamed and hot air seeped out through the bag.

"Godou, give me one."

"Here."

He took out a bun from the paper bag and handed it to Erica.

As their fingers touched slightly, Godou felt an inexplicable sense of embarrassment. Then Erica chuckled, further intensifying Godou's feeling.

Oh well, by this point, Godou did not think this was the only cause.

Moreover, this midnight snack was the result of Erica's negotiations with the store employee just now.

Pleading repeatedly, she managed to take their purchases out of the shop which normally did not provide takeout service. Indeed, since they were on the road back to the hotel, getting takeout was preferable to sitting down to eat.

These Chinese buns were of the pork bun variety.

Taking a huge bite, Godou found the meat juices from the bun filling up his mouth. Quite delicious. Enjoying this midnight snack , the two of them continued to stroll casually.

Godou was overcome with deep emotion.

He never expected he would ever have a chance to be off in the faraway land of Rome, late at night like this, strolling casually through the streets with a blonde girl, eating pork buns...

Had someone told Godou several months ago he was going to experience this kind of future, he would surely have roared with laughter.

Unintentionally, he glanced at Erica's side profile. Then discovering his gaze, Erica smiled back at him. That was all. No words were exchanged deliberately.

But it was already enough.

Godou could vividly feel what seemed to be the "relationship" he had cultivated with Erica.

Furthermore, wondering what he should say a little while later, Godou finally finished his "mental preparation."

In the end, it took them fifty minutes of walking to reach the ten-odd story hotel.

Glancing at the attendant standing at the entrance, Erica asked:

"So Godou, are you prepared?"

"Yeah. I guess so."

"Very well then. Let us exchange 'goodnights,' okay?"

The blonde girl giggled mischievously. However, Godou's response was:

"Umm well... I can't do it after all."

"Can't do it?"

As Erica expressed mild surprise, Godou continued.

"Yeah. I definitely can't kiss you with a casual relaxed mood."

Godou expressed his thoughts candidly.

"How should I put this, I suppose it's my obstinacy as a Japanese...? Perhaps I would not have a problem with someone else, but with you, Erica, engaging in that kind of behavior just feels so difficult no matter what..."

He could feel the loud beating of his heart whenever he made close contact with Erica.

Recalling the feeling, he made this vague statement.

"This has nothing to do with nationality but your personal problem as the man Kusanagi Godou. Seriously, you're obstinate only on issues like this!"

Erica asserted with a tone of lamentation.

"Clearly we have already engaged in behavior even more intense than ritual kissing, so there's no point in being conscious of such meaningless things. Besides, while we were walking here together, didn't you fail to hold my hand? That's quite ill-mannered too."

"Hand!?"

"Yes. Given this rare opportunity for us to take a stroll in the streets of Rome, just the two of us, we should have held hands and embraced each other, to enjoy this short tryst."

"O-Only couples would do that!"

"Have you forgotten? I am your lover, the woman closest to you in this world."

Erica declared proudly to Godou's panic.

"Even if I were not, there is nothing wrong with what I said, based on your behavior towards girls in general."

"N-Nonsense. I have neither done that sort of thing nor spoken those kinds of words."

"Not words. However, I wish to accept your hands with my whole body, expressing my intent through my attitude. That said, you seem to have failed to notice."

"Eh... Really?"

Was that the meaning behind Erica's attitude displayed earlier?

Stunned, Godou watched as the passionate Latin girl sighed before him.

"Indeed. But I can't believe you simply walked side by side with me, Godou... You are really slow witted and a block of wood who can't read the mood. In Italy, even students in elementary school know how to please a girl."

"No, but I'm Japanese."

"You're totally unmanly whenever you make that kind of statement. Don't say it ever again."

Erica suddenly went "however" and smiled.

"I admit you are a very special person, so I shall forgive you on this point. If you don't express your gratitude towards my vast generosity, perhaps you might suffer retribution in the future."

"Eh!?"

"Hoho. Did you fail to notice? What was already voiced out just now."

How could this be? No, but perhaps. Godou wondered if he had said something unwise without noticing?

As Godou felt shaken, Erica led him into the hotel and received two keys at the reception. Handing one of them over to Godou, Erica said:

"Then rest well tonight. Goodnight."

"Yeah, goodnight."

Godou nodded as he yawned.

He was going to have a bath and go to sleep immediately after getting to his room. After all, he was already quite tired. As decided earlier, he would reflect properly on tonight's events in the morning—Just as he was considering these and other matters...

Erica kissed him.

A light peck of a kiss. Bodily contact that substituted for a greeting... Completely unexpected.

Immediately, the second wave of kissing followed.

Erica sealed Godou's lips with her own and began to squirm seductively.

Then she inserted her tongue. Erica began to lick Godou's tongue passionately with careful attention... This lasted a minute or two.

Phew. Releasing their lips, Erica exhaled softly.

"W-What are you doing so suddenly..."

"A goodnight kiss. Since you won't kiss me, then I have to kiss you instead."

Erica displayed an adorable smile in response to Godou's shocked question.

What on earth was she doing in this hotel lobby!? No wait, this was late at night, without a single person around. Perhaps being seen was avoided—

Surveying the surroundings, Godou realized.

The young attendant standing at the reception was staring in his direction.

If one were to ask if the attendant respected the guests' privacy with a sense of professionalism and cast a glance that pretended not to have witnessed anything, the answer was a resounding no.

Nodding towards Godou, he seemed to be saying "I saw everything" as he winked and smiled.

Moreover, Erica went as far as to wave in response to the hotel staff. Completely calm and composed, she maintained her devilish smile.

However, as an ordinary member of the Yamato race, Godou was not in command of that sort of composure.

Lacking in Latin lineage, Kusanagi Godou frantically dashed towards the elevator. He had to take a shower in his room as quickly as possible, to wash away this sense of embarrassment!

"This is truly goodnight this time, Godou. See you tomorrow morning."

Erica sounded as if she were going to pursue him. Showing only his back as he listened to her words, Godou rushed into the elevator as if fleeing for his life.

Chapter 3 - A Set of Three...?

It was almost noon on a Saturday. Naturally, school was closed today.

Godou was visiting Nanao Shrine located in the city center.

"Athena and Kusanagi-san's battle... A week has already passed since then.."

Yuri spoke softly as she swept the confines of the shrine.

Wearing a miko's outfit consisting of a white robe with a red hakama, she was holding a bamboo broom in her hands. Mariya Yuri was the Hime-Miko who served her duties at Nanao Shrine, a member of the Hime-Miko organization which guarded Japan's sites of spiritual power.

"Ah yeah. Time really seems to fly."

Godou responded with deep feeling. He too, was sweeping the shrine territory with a bamboo broom.

Earlier, he had made an appointment with Yuri to meet here together with a third person. When he arrived at the shrine, he found the Hime-Miko in the middle of sweeping.

Because he felt it would be boring to hang around doing nothing while waiting for Yuri to finish her sweeping, Godou suggested he pitch in to help.

As a result, the two of them were doing the cleaning together.

The current season was early summer. An excellent time of the year when it was neither too hot nor too cold.

Also, the confines of the shrine were surrounded by a protective forest, giving it a sense of peace and quiet one would not associate with the city center. The air and breeze were also quite refreshing. A pleasant environment.

Nevertheless, the topic of conversation was not particularly cheerful between these two.

"The total damage from last time... Amakasu-san has made a rough estimate."

"Eh!?"

If possible, Godou did not wish to know. However, this was news that he had to hear no matter what.

Godou prepared himself. The whole reason why he arrived before the appointed time at Nanao Shrine was because he wanted to ask Yuri about this matter.

How far reaching were the effects of the battle?

"So how much was it...?

"Y-Yes. Amakasu-san said the following in his usual manner--"

The words of the History Compilation Committee special agent.

'There is no way to calculate exactly, but a rough estimate would place economic losses at several tens of billions of yen. This is only an approximate figure for now, but in any case it should be in the ballpark.'

Going beyond frivolous, perhaps one could call his attitude as taking things rather philosophically.

Hearing Amakasu's comments recounted, Godou bowed his head dejectedly. Most likely, he was responsible for a fair percentage of that figure.

"I feel really sorry about this..."

"Kusanagi-san. Even if you apologize to me, it is completely meaningless."

"You're right... Sorry."

Yuri's troubled words sent Godou's mood further into depression.

However, he immediately thought of something instead. The people who are entitled to be depressed are the victims who suffered hardship as a result of the commotion. As one of the main culprits, what he should be doing is deep reflection and strict reminder to avoid doing something similar again.

In his mind he vowed never to cause another incident like that again!

Godou suddenly looked up and spoke to Yuri with great conviction of spirit.

"Mariya, I have a request. Could you use your usual attitude to scold me, and point out all the places I have done wrong!?"

"Eh?"

"Please. In order to prevent me from making the same mistakes. Let this stand as the resolve in my heart!"

"H-How could I... Suddenly requested by you like this..."

The prim and proper Yamato Nadeshiko said frantically, showing great indecision.

"Everything I wanted to convey to Kusanagi-san has basically been said to you last week already. By now, I do not believe there is any need to repeat them again."

Yuri expressed her opinion with a troubled expression. I see.

She was not only a dignified and stately high-class lady but also a Hime-Miko -- in accordance to this title of "Hime," she possessed a noble sense of responsibility. She was a precious friend who could courageously offer honest advice even in the face of the " Devil King" Kusanagi Godou.

She had already reprimanded him for several of his problematic behaviors during the battle against Athena.

Instead of resent, Godou felt thankful towards her instead.

Having become "the man who had slain a god" due to various reasons, Kusanagi Godou found himself being treated as king by many people even though he considered the status unsuited for him. In order to prevent himself from growing arrogant and straying into an improper path, he hoped that Yuri could advise and reprimand him whenever the opportunity arose.

Hence, Godou now stared straight into Yuri's eyes and requested her once again.

"Isn't there some kind of saying about healed scars and whatnot ? I don't think that is something I'm capable of. No matter how many times you repeat yourself, I will accept all reprimands!"

"B-But Kusanagi-san. Based on your behavior, very clearly you are disposed towards 'forgetting the pain as soon as the scar is healed.' "

As Yuri spoke with hesitation, Godou groaned "Hmm."

"Indeed, I believe Kusanagi-san is an honest person. However, while you repeatedly regret and reflect on your past behavior, you keep making the same mistakes time and again. Ah, could it be true that--"

Yuri suddenly showed an expression as if she realized something.

Godou began to get nervous. After all, Yuri seemed to be a miko possessing spirit vision, which was something like clairvoyance. Reportedly, whenever she felt concerned, she often discerned the truth when all others were stumped.

For a girl like that to be suddenly surprised, surely it must be because she saw something.

"C-Could it be... You saw something?"

"I keep getting the feeling that Kusanagi-san does not reflect enough."

"Why?"

"Because you are too driven by emotion in those kinds of situations. Probably, despite knowing rationally you are wrong, you discard these notions when the raging flames in your heart flare up, recklessly rampaging on instantaneous impulse without any regard for plans--"

"!"

Looking back at his life up to this point, Godou did indeed recall many memories that fitted this description.

Godou became aware of the stiffening of his own expression. Seeing his reaction, Yuri frantically said:

"I-It is only just a feeling. I have no idea if I am right or not."

"N-No, your feelings are completely on target. Perhaps I really do have that kind of side to me."

Godou muttered gloomily.

"My little sister at home often says that the men in my family always acted in this fashion."

"Is that really so?"

Godou nodded as Yuri's eyes widened in surprise.

"Uh yeah. Pretty much the type of 'rascal' who cannot stop as soon as they get worked up. Immigrating to Brazil on a whim, for example; going missing in the Amazon basin; striking it rich overnight in the black market after a war and then turn dirt poor entirely through his own fault; planning to become a monk at a monastery in the mountains but somehow end up wandering to Shanghai; as well as playboys who could sweet talk women as naturally as breathing..."

"Well..."

Yuri was greatly surprised to learn about such misconduct in the Kusanagi family which were seldom mentioned due to their scandalous nature.

"Pretty much cases of that sort. Wasting their vitality unnecessarily, causing trouble to the people around them."

"Now that you put it that way, I guess it really does describe you rather well, Kusanagi-san..."

"Ugh!"

Having offered his honest opinion, and to have Yuri respond in such a way, Godou felt like a chunk was being torn out of his heart .

Had the previous statement been said by Erica, at least he could easily retort back "Someone who causes even more trouble to others has no right to say that!" But this time, the speaker was Yuri.

The honest truth, as spoken by this high-class young lady's forthright lack of pretense, was like a stab in the heart.

Seeing Godou in low spirits, Yuri's gaze showed sympathy.

"K-Kusanagi-san, since you realize you need to reflect carefully, then this just about concludes things? Let us end the conversation at this point..."

"No, that's not enough. I have to free myself from this vicious cycle."

Godou gritted his teeth and resolutely raised his head.

"Mariya. You must speak more strictly. Using that horrifying pressure of yours!"

"B-But even if you ask me to do that... Ah I got it."

Seeing Yuri bow her head awkwardly then suddenly looked up again, Godou's hopes were raised.

"You got something!?"

"Yes. I forgot something important."

Yuri's tone became stern and serious. Apparently, she finally recovered her past condition.

Godou stood straight as he waited for the Hime to reprimand him -- and even urged her in encouragement.

"I understand. Please say anything you want without reservation. I will accept them all completely!"

"Then I shall not hesitate. This is about Erica-san."

"Eh, you're going to talk about that!?"

Being attacked in an unexpected direction, Godou was greatly shocked.

"B-But isn't now the time for reflecting about my battle with Athena? The matter of Erica isn't really the main point."

"You did say you would accept anything I wanted to say, Kusanagi-san."

Yuri's sharp gaze focused on Godou as she spoke.

That expression, gaze and tone of voice of hers were filled with the stately solemnity of a noble princess.

"Or perhaps you feel guilty about certain areas, and therefore could not bear to listen humbly to opinions regarding the issue of girls and lovers' relationships?"

"No, I don't have issues with girls and lovers in the first place!"

"In that case, why do you feel you need to avoid the topic!?"

Hence--

During this sunny day on the weekend, before the plum rain season was about to begin, Godou endured Yuri's merciless tongue lashing regarding the issue of "this past week, whether he had resolutely refused bodily contact with the woman who claimed to be his lover." As if paying penance, he was sweeping the confines of Nanao Shrine at the same time.

Finally, the lecture and the sweeping ended after thirty minutes or so.

"T-Thank you, Mariya... Your various lessons have been firmly engraved in the depths of my heart now..."

"N-No, I should apologize instead. I have said some rather impertinent things."

Godou expressed gratitude with an exhausted tone of voice, causing Yuri to panic.

"Besides, the one who should express thanks should be me. Thank you very much."

"Eh? What did I do?"

"Did you not help me sweep?"

Reminded by Yuri, Godou was taken aback.

He did not consider such a task worthy of being thanked.

Seeing Godou like this, Yuri smiled. This was a cute smile akin to a blooming cherry blossom, completely devoid of the stern oppressive pressure just now.

Instead, she was showing a consoling smile towards Godou's absentmindedness.

Godou felt embarrassed by her gentle expression.

She was truly a kindhearted girl with a heart of gold. True, she was inexperienced in worldly matters and liked lecturing a bit too much. Furthermore, she was a high-class young lady who was quite strict on Godou's misconduct. Nevertheless, her sense of responsibility brought out that inborn aura of nobility of hers.

Even though Godou only started dealing with her recently, his experiences throughout the battle against Athena fully convinced him of this fact about Yuri.

That's the way she was. Whether strict or gentle, Yuri's qualities were unbelievably impressed upon his inner heart.

"By the way, there's something slightly strange here."

As Godou and Yuri organized the cleaning equipment in the shrine office building, he brought this up.

"Normally, other than miko a shrine should have priests present , right? But other than you, Mariya, I haven't seen anyone else. Though I get the impression that someone passed by and gave me a quick glance."

He had visited Nanao Shrine a few times already. Godou suddenly brought up this question that had bothered him.

Presented with the question, Yuri displayed an expression as if she had difficulty answering.

"Ah... That is because."

"If it's inconvenient for you to answer, then I won't pursue it any further."

"Ah, no. That is not it. It is simply difficult to say out... In actual fact, apart from me, all the other people are hiding to avoid Kusanagi-san."

"Eh?"

"After all, it is the arrival of the Devil King and monarch who slew a god -- the great Campione. Everyone is rather terrified of that."

"I see..."

Godou's spirits were further depressed. He had a feeling it was not simply reverence but reasons like "terrifying" and "a taboo existence that one should not have contact with."

"Ah! Of course, I would never do that."

Yuri frantically added this last sentence.

"Although I imagined all sorts of things before I met you and was convinced you were a terrifying person, after encountering you for the first time, somehow I immediately knew that was not the case."

Godou recalled his first meeting with Yuri.

In the beginning, she treated him with great respect and her attitude was quite cautious. However, starting from a certain moment, she suddenly expressed strict disapproval of his behavior . Perhaps it was Yuri's power of spirit vision that had seen through Godou's true nature during the brief time they interacted together.

After putting the cleaning equipment in order, Godou glanced at the clock on his cellphone.

It was not yet 1pm. Godou had originally made an appointment to go out together with Yuri as well as a third person. Since the meeting time was 2pm, there was still some free time left.

Godou suddenly felt uneasy.

"That Erica, who knows if she got out of bed properly?"

"It is already afternoon, normally I would expect things to be fine?"

Yuri smiled wryly but Godou shook his head.

"No, that girl is particularly weak in regards to rising out of bed. From what I've heard, it is not surprising for her to sleep till noon on weekends."

This was what he had learned from Erica's assistant and personal maid, so it should be accurate. Because the person Godou and Yuri were waiting for was Erica Blandelli.

The whole thing began from a request Erica made a few days ago.

"Hey Godou, it is only appropriate that I expect you to accompany me around Japan seeing that it is my first time here, right?"

Hearing that, Godou was shocked.

"But clearly your Japanese is completely fluent?"

"That was simply learned through a mage's basic education. Familiarity with all the languages of the world is a requirement for all followers of Hermes. I have also been to the Chinese mainland many times and even stayed in Hong Kong for a substantial period , but I've never been to Japan before."

Naturally, Godou's second answer to her request was affirmative.

But if he were to spend time with her alone, he would have to face her overwhelming passion.

Hence, he hoped to bring along a third person if possible. Who knew if Erica would generously accept an additional person if it were Yuri? But no matter what, Erica herself did mention to Godou before, "Please develop good relations with Mariya Yuri."

Hence, after making his suggestion to both Erica and Yuri, it resulted in today's appointment.

"Well, fine. Rather than mock you for attempting to escape from a private date between two people, I will respect your courage in taking on the challenge of having a lady on each arm."

"If you two were to go sightseeing alone, it really would be worrying. Perhaps Tokyo would be met with unforeseeable danger, and furthermore, I would feel uncomfortable if Kusanagi-san were to fall to Erica-san's seductive charms..."

While one of the girls displayed surprise as she teased, the other expressed her concern for local peace and offered commentary on Kusanagi Godou's poor reputation...

There was still time until 2pm.

But feeling worried, Godou took out his cellphone to make a call. Not Erica, but the girl who managed the Blandelli home.

'Ah, it's Godou-san?'

Arianna-san's voice responded. She was the girl who was employed as Erica's assistant and personal maid.

"Excuse me, just in case I had to confirm this, has that girl Erica gotten out of bed yet?"

'I'm sorry, she has not woken up yet. Last night, Erica-sama went out until very late and only went to bed at dawn."

"...Seriously. What the heck was that girl doing the night before our appointment?"

His worst fear turning out to be true, Godou sighed.

Nevertheless, Arianna replied in a cheerful voice.

'Hoho, please rest assured. Today's appointment is at 2pm, is that correct? No problem. Even if Erica-sama continues to sleep, I will carry her to the car and deliver her over to Godou-san. I will make sure she arrives before the appointed time, please wait.'

Getting Erica out of bed was quite a difficult task. When getting up, her usual talent and intellect was nowhere to be found. Instead , she would refuse to get up, acting like a young child.

...As a side note, if one were to ask why Godou knew this about her.

That was because he went to pick her up every morning to go to school. Because Arianna was unable to wake up her willful mistress, Godou resorted to this in order to prevent Erica from being late for school.

Hence, that was the reason why Arianna had presented the " deliver her over by car even if she continues to sleep" statement.

"You don't have to do that. I'm coming over right now to get Erica to get up!"

Godou declared as if yelling.

Although he was currently talking to a girl that was on his good books, at the same time, she was also someone in possession of driving skills that he would like to keep off the road as much as possible. This knowledge was what compelled him to offer this alternative solution.

Godou ended the call and looked up, his gaze meeting with Yuri's.

"As expected, Erica is dallying after all. I'm gonna pick her up."

"In that case, let me come along."

"Eh?"

"After all, we are going out together afterwards. This way we can avoid wasting extra time, right?"

Yuri suggested with a smile. Hence, Godou accepted graciously.

In actual fact, their original plan was to depart from Nanao Shrine in Shiba Park and set off for the area of Tokyo Tower and the Meiji Shrine.

In that case, switching locations would be a wiser choice. Erica's apartment was situated in the Hongou district in the Bunkyou ward. Having decided to visit tourist attractions in that area, Godou and Yuri headed towards Erica's residence together.

Little did he know, this act was akin to digging his own grave...

"I never knew that Kusanagi-san went as far as to rouse Erica-san from her slumber every morning..."

As he walked beside Yuri, Godou listened in trepidation as she spoke with a sigh.

Two hours had elapsed since they left Nanao Shrine together.

Along with Erica, they were now located in the shopping street near Sensou-ji Temple in the Taitou ward.

A row of ten stalls were selling local products, little trinkets and roadside snacks. This was a tourist destination in the Bunkyou ward where foreigners new to Japan would be taken to.

Godou and Yuri were walking side by side along the shopping street.

Because today was an afternoon on a holiday, there were many people and it was quite crowded.

Erica toured the shopping street with quick, light steps as if she enjoyed this taste of traditional Japanese culture. She tried on a Shinsengumi jacket that was being sold at a stall, pulled out a toy Japanese sword to play around with, and even put on a geisha wig .

Following behind her were the two Japanese, Godou and Yuri.

Yuri sighed slightly, making Godou feel apologetic.

"That girl Erica, if we left her alone she would have slept all the way, completely unaware she was going to be late."

"Concerning this point, Kusanagi-san, I am actually wondering if you are spoiling her too much with your intimate care. Although you informed the household beforehand, you did enter a girl's bedroom without any hesitation, you know? And with Erica-san dressed in that particular manner."

When the two had visited Erica's apartment, the mistress of the house was elegantly enjoying her afternoon nap.

And just as Arianna was hastily trying to rouse her from bed, she went:

"No. Without Godou whispering words of love by my ear, I shall continue sleeping here."

Godou seemed to hear Erica murmur something like that.

In response, Godou went "How could she say something so outrageous when everyone else is waiting for her?" and rushed into the bedroom. Then Yuri said "K-Kusanagi-san, need I remind you this is Erica-san's -- a girl's room!" and frantically followed along.

Wrapped in a light down blanket, Erica was sleeping blissfully.

Only after Godou angrily pulled away her blanket did he realize a certain fact. That Erica, who liked to wear little when she slept, had taken off the t-shirt she wore to bed last night in place of pajamas, leaving only a pair of panties on her person--

"Seriously... Kusanagi-san really is 'absentminded' to an excessive degree!"

"T-This is the first time she is dressed like this!"

"In other words, you are very clear on the fact that Erica-san always wears little when she goes to bed every night? In that case, Kusanagi-san's behavior really is too rash."

"R-Right, I cannot refute this point."

Scolded, Godou began to feel disheartened. How many times has he been reprimanded today now?

Yuri seemed to have thought the same thing, and she relaxed her expression after a brief sigh.

"Let us leave it at that. After all, we came to go out and have fun ."

"I-Is that so? I'm really sorry."

"Hoho. Today's lecture has finished?"

Erica returned with perfect timing. Apparently, she had been silently observing the two of them just now.

"So, it's about time to go enjoy ourselves. To commemorate Erica Blandelli's long term relocation to Japan, as well as wonderful fate which has brought the three of us together."

"Fate?"

"Yes, that's correct, Yuri. If we did not encounter one another in the first place, then today's group would not exist. Shouldn't we do something to commemorate our mutual encounters?"

Erica explained cheerfully in response to Yuri's surprise.

Her tone of voice was glamorous and clear as always. Erica's childish behavior when getting up was completely gone. Smiling with a chuckle, she took Yuri's hand as a knight would take a lady's.

"That store over there looks interesting, let's choose some suitable clothing for you, Yuri."

Erica cast her glance towards a store that rented outfits out to foreign tourists as she spoke.

"Eh!? I have to wear it too!?"

"I was thinking if we took a photo, that would be perfect. Recording our memories in this manner is not a bad idea."

Slightly aggressive but not very forceful in actual fact, Erica led the conservative Yamato Nadeshiko towards the crowd.

With some hesitation, Yuri followed as she held Erica's hand.

As a side note, they were both currently wearing Jounan Academy's female school uniform. Godou had heard earlier that Yuri had gone to school during the morning for a gathering of the Tea Ceremony Club.

Seeing her dressed like that, Erica went "Well, then I'll wear that too" and wore her uniform as well.

Watching them from behind, Godou suddenly had a notion. In appearance, the two girls seemed to be partners on a school trip, a pair who were very close friends.

Erica with her extroverted personality and Yuri with her serious character.

Godou believed the two were rather incompatible in this regard .

Nevertheless, Erica was very open-minded and tolerant despite her tendency to do things as she pleased. On the other hand, Yuri appeared passive but was unexpectedly resilient. In this regard, perhaps the two of them might be quite compatible after all.

--Erica and Yuri, what sort of relationship would they develop in the end?

The two girls' conversation drifted into Godou's ears as he fell into deep thought.

"So, to think you would attempt to teach Godou what was truly the right path... Yuri, you have an unexpectedly persevering spirit. I offer you my heartfelt praise and admiration."

"I-I only wish that Kusanagi-san could act with a little more caution..."

"That said, this is Godou we're talking about, you know? Through the battle with Athena, you should probably have understood, he is a person who cannot be stopped once he explodes out of control, right? Furthermore, he completely ignores minor details."

"That truly is... Indeed it is as you say."

"Putting it positively, he is very adaptable to situations. More tactlessly put, let me see--"

"Goes with the flow, is that it..."

"Yes. That's true indeed."

"B-But even though he really is rather troubling to others, I still believe in Kusanagi-san."

"Yuri, you must be a believer in the fundamentally benevolent nature of mankind. I like that sort of innocence about you. However, what about the person in question, how about Godou?"

At some point in time, the two girls had started commenting on Kusanagi Godou's character flaws.

From an outsider's perspective, the two girls appeared to be getting along amiably as they conversed. However, all Godou could feel was apprehension.

If the two of them became close friends, would they unite in a single front to start criticizing and making trouble for me in unison ?

...Never in Godou's wildest dreams would he expect his prediction to come true in the near future, with even two more members joining in.

Chapter 4 - The Imprisoned Campione

Kusanagi Godou.

Japanese nationality, sixteen years old, male.

He, from the Jounan Academy High School Division, did not think of himself as the type that particularly stood out.

His personality was on the gentler side, more or less.

He was not like those who enjoyed making a racket in the middle of class, nor was he a pupil who often voiced his opinions out loud. It wasn't that he was bad at associating with people or was an eccentric.

Looks wise, he was ordinary.

According to his fault-finding sister, 'If he works harder he should be able to become even better, but it's because he's been slacking that he's the way he is now'. And to Erica Blandelli, his ' partner' with whom he already had an inseparable relationship, ' His physique isn't bad, but he's lacking in the charisma and majesty departments'.

His results were above average. His forte was in arts and humanities, whereas he did not do well in science.

He had confidence in his physical abilities, but not in the same way as those Olympic athletes.

In actual fact, he possessed an inexplicable power that went against the laws of nature, but what could only be said of him in the context of this school was that he was a perfectly normal student.

Which is why, [mediocre] and [moderate]... that sort of expression was probably appropriate for him.

— *Hey, Kusanagi. What kind of person do you think you are?*

One day during break time, in the classroom of the first year's fifth class.

In the face of that question from his peers, Godou did not answer.

At that time, the ones that happened to be present were Takagi, Nanami and Sorimachi.

The three of them were the same; from the fifth class of the first years. Then, the three of them together, for some reason, stared strangely at Godou's face.... *What's up with that bizarre look you're giving me?*

It was the expression of peasants suffering under heavy taxation and oppressive rule, who were glaring at the responsible tyrant in anger and infuriation. With enmity in their hearts, the eyes that revealed the endured fury within. Like a blade with a seemingly dull edge, it was a dangerous look —

It was exactly like that description.

"... Hey, are you listening?"

"... Yeah, he heard you. This guy does not understand his own situation at all. This bastard king!"

"... The usual plan, as I thought it seems that we have to proceed with it, eh."

Then, they started to whisper and murmur to each other.

"Oi, what are you guys talking about in secret? Also about that question, was there some meaning behind it?"

"Don't be concerned with such insignificant details, Kusanagi. This score must be settled!"

"Hahaha, what are you *saying*[1]. Forget what was just said, Kusanagi. Don't assume that there's a moon every night!"

"Oi oi, you let your true feelings slip, control yourselves a little more. By retributive justice, the devil ought to die!"

".... Are you alright, guys? You all look seriously weird."

Godou asked worriedly.

However, they did not answer him, simply returning to their own seats with dark expressions on their faces.

— After school, on the same day as that event.

Kusanagi Godou was abruptly, kidnapped and confined.

■■■

"— With that, let us begin the first commission of inquiry on that son of a bitch Kusanagi Godou who has monopolized the two great bishoujos of the campus. Everyone, are you ready?"

"No problem! Let us pass the judgment of righteousness on Kusanagi Godou, enemy of the unpopular!"

"Agreed! We, based on the impartial ideology of love collectivism, cast our blame upon the bourgeoisie[2] that hog the wealth injusticely!"

That day, Godou was on duty.

He needed to just collect the printouts to be submitted that day and place them on the teacher-in-charge's desk in the staff room. Finishing that task, he returned to the first year's fifth class classroom.

It was on the way back that the act of kidnapping was carried out decisively.

In a place where there was no one close by, Godou was covered head-first with a large jute bag.

No matter how much he struggled with his arms and legs, it was useless. Godou was then lifted up by a few people, and brought away like that. To make matters worse, his limbs were all bound by duct tape, his movements restrained.

And then, the one who removed the bag from his head, before him —

It was a room with windows that were covered by black curtains, blocking out the sunlight, a classroom somewhere in the school. The lights were off, and it was pitch-dark.

The only source of light was the torchlight that someone was holding.

With just that, it was difficult to understand the situation.

But Godou had night-vision on par with an owl's, and with that he surveyed the surroundings. Perhaps, it was an empty classroom that was not often used.

That could be surmised from the fact that there were no desks arranged in the classroom.

And, the shape of the three people before him —

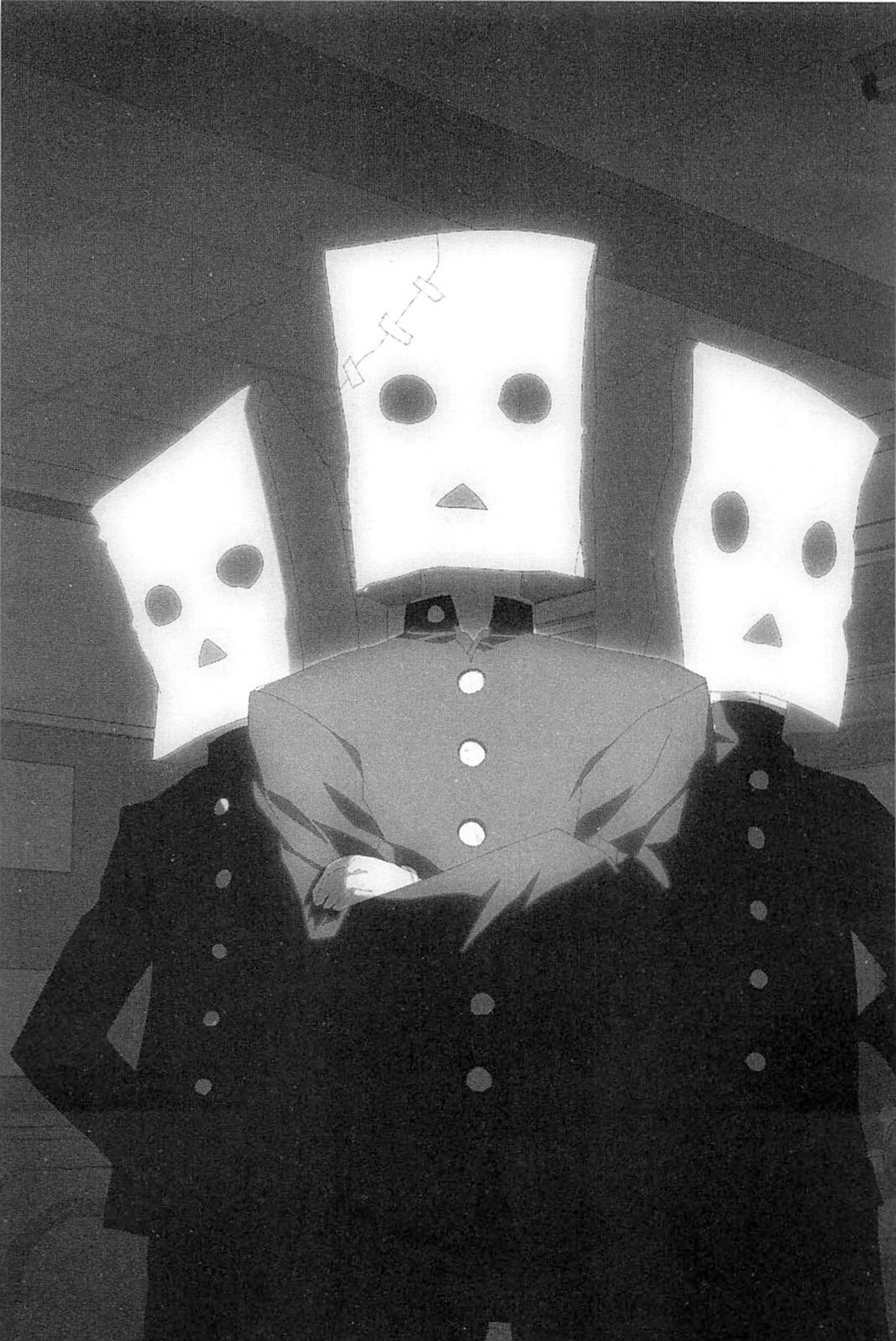
They had paper bags over their heads. There were openings in said paper bags, slits for their eyes.

He could not discern their identities by just that. *Just who were they?* They, who had captured and subsequently confined him. He had no clue who they were exactly, but he could guess. At last, have the people from the magic associations infiltrated into the school?

Even so, Kusanagi Godou was a [King].

Having undertaken such bold measures, could it be that someone powerful was pulling the strings behind this?

They were also thoroughly prepared, dressed in the correct High School Division uniform. And on their head were paper bags . Only the eyes and mouth regions were cut open. Like this, their identities could not be dis — cerned....



Godou remembered something about the voices earlier, and looking at their stature, he realized.

"What are you doing, Takagi. Over there, are Nanami and Sorimachi, right?"

"F-fool! We do not go by those kinds of names!"

"Yea, yeah. We are absolutely not classmates with a bastard like you!

"Yes, we are the Gang of Justice, those who lament over the state of the country, and love the nation! Do not misunderstand!"

The trio proclaimed, evidently in a panic.

"How should I say this... I didn't think you guys were this stupid. As of now, your crimes are still forgivable. Kindly release me."

Filled with pity and amazement, Godou advised.

At any rate, why do I have to suffer something like this?

"Keh! This guy, from the look in his eyes, he thinks that he's being confined under false charges!"

One of the idiot trio shined his torchlight right in Godou's face, and spat out.

As I thought, that was Takagi's voice.

"Calm down. We have plenty of time. To this insolent asshole, without rushing, let us tell him the true severity of his sins!"

Almost like an 'underling A' type of character entering onto the stage in some historical play. This should be Nanami.

"Aaah, let us teach this guy a lesson or two. In the place of God, we shall pass judgment over him!"

And this was the trademark phrase of the hero protagonist. The voice belonged to Sorimachi.

".... Although I don't really get what's going on, but I understand your determination. First, remove the tape, and then we'll talk this over peacefully, ok?"

"Kukuku. You bastard, it seems you still do not understand your current position."

One of the idiot trio, probably Sorimachi, declared.

"What we seek, is not to talk things over with a bastard like you! This is judgment!"

"... J-judgment?"

"Kusanagi Godou! You are a bastard who toys with the hearts and desires, the bodies of the two great bishoujos of the school, the tyrant managing a harem! For that crime, you deserve certain death!"

".... What?"

Godou felt the sensation of giddiness, hearing Sorimachi's accusation.

The two great bishoujos. Harem. What on earth were these guys talking about?

"Comrade T[3]! Read out loud, the first of Kusanagi Godou's crimes!"

"Ooh! ... Number one, the accused, was involved with the blond goddess who possesses a transcendent body, at various locations — t-the classroom, the campus, the roadside, before the general public! Flirting while clinging together, confirming their love, and yet he insists that there is nothing going on between him and Erica-sama!"

"Ngh! That crime, is something inexcusable!"

"No objections! Kusanagi Godou deserves certain death!"

... Godou was stunned.

Up till now, he had been stunned, but that last exchange was the final confirmation he needed. How should he put it, it was simply overwhelmingly retarded. He had keenly realized just how genuinely moronic these guys were.

It was unnecessary to play along with this kind of stupid skit.

He threw out his chest, and with resolution, he felt that it was a conversation that was best ignored.

With regards to this matter, Kusanagi Godou did not carry any guilty conscie.... nce, but in actual fact, although it was a case of sour grapes, the circumstances might justify this lie.

■■■

"Hey, Godou..."

The sunlight of the evening sunset shone in from the window, dyeing the after school classroom in a shade of orange.

At this time, there were only two students left. Namely, the pair comprising of Kusanagi Godou and Erica Blandelli.

"Now, we're all alone in this place... Fufu, isn't it somewhat lovely? Although it's always crowded with people, it's just the two of us here? I think that this is very luxurious, don't you agree."

The bishoujo with slightly reddish blond hair said, while gazing up at Godou's face with seemingly moist eyes.

Yes, a bishoujo.

Erica Blandelli was undeniably an extraordinarily beautiful

maiden. If one were to ask a hundred people, all of them would undoubtedly acknowledge this fact.

However, her looks were not the only extraordinary part about her.

Smart, strong, having great confidence in herself, and furthermore, she was a tactician. On top of her beauty, she had absolute confidence in her own abilities, and Godou could strongly feel her presence, more than any other bishoujo he knew.

"Then, let me ask you a question. The two of us, sharing such a lovely time and place together, what do you think we should be doing now?"

"H-how about obediently going home like good students?"

"Of course I'll reject that... Hmph, with such a heart-thumping scene like this, what kind of absurdity are you saying, Godou. If you weren't you, I'd tear off that mouth so that you wouldn't be able to say that kind of thing a second time."

While on top of Godou's lap, Erica whispered softly.

The words themselves were brutal, but her tone was absurdly sweet.

Moreover, what she was sitting on, was not the chair.

Upon Kusanagi Godou's lap, her soft, tender thighs and bottom were placed. Moreover, both her arms were wrapped around Godou's neck, and she snuggled up against him.

... To say in advance, Godou had been strongly against being in this posture.

However, there were reasons as to why this was the case.

First, the legs. Erica's supple legs were entwined around Godou's lap. The tightness of this clamp, was almost like a latch.

Next, the neck. Resembling white snakes, her slender hands could instantly break Godou's neck should she feel like it. Also, she could certainly constrict his carotid artery — and render him unconscious.

He could be rendered unconscious, in front of Erica who was prepared to assault him.

That would be a foolish action, much like trying to climb a wintry mountain nude. No matter what happened after, he would not be able to make any excuses or complaints.

Erica Blandelli, Italian, sixteen years old. Possessing an attractive face and figure, a brilliant mind, amazingly athletic, she was surely a superhuman. However, with regards to any form of domestic chores, she couldn't and would not do them. And lastly, one who had joke-like titles such as [Witch] and [Knight].

.... That kind of girl's moist lips were, approaching Godou's own .

What to do? What do I want to do? What should I do? Godou's mental state was caught in a whirlpool of chaos. In the face of this unavoidable threat, he wanted to escape from reality.

In the horror novels he had once read, there would be a monologue in this kind of extreme situation. Afterwards, he would see a white figure outside the window, and then a black monster would show up there. And finally, it would be a bad end-like ending.

In order to gain victory over this impending pressure, Godou looked out towards the window.

Aah. Outside the window, outside the window — !

... There was no way there would be anything there, and then Godou was toyed around by Erica, just like that. Their tongues overlapping, he ended up amply tasting her mint-flavored lip gloss.

This was an incident that had happened two days ago.

■■■

"Reporting! I saw it. It was yesterday, after school, in a deserted classroom, this guy was ki-ki-ki-ki-ki-kissed by Erica-sama! With all their strength, a s-s-super deep one!"

"W-whaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaat!?"

Godou, who was strongly reminded of that, became flustered.

For someone to have witnessed that scene, it was simply.... However, he was not pushed down. Only a kiss with the meeting of their lips, he had desperately defended himself from sinking any further.

That was why, with regards to having a guilty conscience... of course, he did have it, but somehow, he had been able to overcome that problem and regain his tranquility.

However, at the moment Godou had been secretly relieved, he was asked something like this.

"Kusanagi. You, could it be that you've progressed even further than that with Erica-sama?"

Progressed even further?

It was an ambiguous expression. As was expected, just how far — no, what exactly had he been referring to?

Godou racked his brains out over that.

In the three months that he had come under Erica's fierce assaults, he had desperately resisted her approach. His life flashed before his eyes (Although he was not particularly on the verge of death), and he recalled it.

That kind of thing, this kind of thing, and also those kinds of things had happened before.

.... Hm, well, in some way or another, it felt like he had managed to obstinately resist crossing the line. Forcibly agreeing with himself, Godou could barely manage a reply.

"... Hey you, don't accuse me of such strange doings. It's true that Erica and I have been rather overly daring in certain areas, but there really isn't any suspicious relationship between us. Believe me."

"Comrade N, how long did he take for that reply?"

"According to my stopwatch, it was 8.3 seconds. From his silence until he had said, 'Hey you, don't accuse me', that amount of time has been confirmed."

"From the statistics, that timing is extremely suspicious.... Indeed, suspicious."

"No, what kind of statistics do you mean by 'statistics'!? In the first place, why did you expressly go out of your way to measure that kind of time!"

Ignoring Godou's outcry, the idiot trio gave him a look of contempt and jealousy.

He could not be bothered with them any longer, and needed to escape. Though determined, Godou's limbs were still bound, and there was naught he could do about it.

The other party was comprised of normal civilians. In this case, he could neither utilize his superhuman strength nor teleportation.

Godou, who had several superpowers, could only demonstrate them when facing against a powerful enemy or in certain situations.

".... That is indeed a grave problem to be considered, but we'll go further into that later. Next up on the agenda, Kusanagi Godou's sin number two!"

"Ooh! Allow me to read that out loud!"

The voice which had responded immediately belonged to Sorimachi.

"Kusanagi, though you bear the sin of monopolizing the two great bishoujos, you have also committed another unforgivable great sin. That is the coldness you have shown to your [Imouto]! I blame your stupidity, you bastard who lacks an Imouto fetish!"

".... Imouto?"

Godou was confused. Why did Sorimachi (presumed) suddenly mention 'Imouto'?

"Ngh, it's come to this..."

"As expected of Comrade S, the man who possesses 108 Imoutos in the 2D world... A tenacity to always have 'Imoutos' on his mind, any time of the day, truly we should respect and endeavor to become like him...."

The other two of the idiot trio were greatly impressed. Seriously , these guys were hard to understand.

"Hey Kusanagi. Being so cruel to the Shizuka-chan who is always coming to the classroom, aren't you embarrassed of your own behavior? Don't you consider that to be sinful!?"

".... I didn't really treat her cruelly. It was normal."

■■■

Godou's sister — Kusanagi Shizuka was a third-year student from Jounan Academy's Middle School Division.

For some reason, she had appeared on the rooftop above the classrooms of the High School Division, tagging along with him.

"... Onii-chan, recently you've been extremely dishonest."

And then suddenly, she had thrown out that line, her mood seemingly bad.

By the way, Shizuka's areas of determination were impressive, as she was a sweet girl in the first place.

Perhaps in the near future, she might become a beauty just like their mother of the Kusanagi household. Even if she were only fourteen as of now, she was already said to greatly resemble their mother.

"Why? Although I haven't been particularly very honest, it shouldn't be to the point where my sister is accusing me of dishonesty?"

"Nonsense, why don't you try saying that one more time once you've taken a good look around you!?"

Speaking of which, the conversation took place while they were currently having lunch on the rooftop.

Since June, Godou had been spending his lunch breaks on the rooftop.

He did not spend the time alone. From the same class, Erica was seated next to him, her expression saying that it was perfectly natural of her to do so, and on the other side — was a schoolgirl with black hair tinged with a hue of chestnut, Mariya Yuri.

Together with these two girls, they spent their lunch break on the rooftop having lunch.

It has been Godou's daily routine, recently. Adding Shizuka on top of that.... Just what exactly was dishonest about this situation?

"May I ask what's wrong, Shizuka-san? Indeed, Godou-san... cannot be said to have perfectly irreproachable conduct, but I feel

that he is adequately honest. It would not be good to speak of your Onii-sama in that manner"

Yuri gently chided her, while smiling.

Occasionally dignified, while during other times she could exhibit the intensity of a yasha, but normally she was a refined, tidy Ojou-sama. And above all else, beautiful.

Mariya Yuri could stand shoulder-to-shoulder against Erica as a bishoujo.

However, from an onlooker's point of view, one would feel that Yuri did not possess a degree of glamour comparable to that of Erica's. In place of that difference, Yuri was more of the kind that would cause you to be attracted the more you look at her.

For example, the lovely yet unseen mountain cherry blossoms that bloomed in profusion.

That was Mariya Yuri.

"But, that's true. Just as Shizuka-san had said, it might be better if Godou-san became a little more honest... Up till now, you have caused me to worry to no ends. Your relationships with friends, your relationships with girls, your normal actions, Godou-san, you ought to take another good look at your surroundings, hm?"

"You're strict as ever, Mariya..."

Godou grumbled, in response to Yuri who had said that demurely.

She was not your normal Ojou-sama. Her other identity was that of a Musashino Hime-Miko that served to guard the entire district of Kanto spiritually. The possessor of a clairvoyance-like ability, her powers were acknowledged even by Erica.

And, she was a friend who supported Godou after finding out about his troublesome situation.

After the incident in June, his relations with Yuri had improved greatly. The girl, who had been nothing but harsh and severe to him at first, could now crack such jokes with him. And then, when their gazes crossed, smiling, they could understand the minds of the other.

Being able to communicate without needing to say much — they had built up such a comfortable relationship.

"O-Onii-chan! And Mariya-san too, stop being in your own worlds when the two of you are looking into each other's eyes! That kind of thing is dishonest, imprudent! Mariya-san, don't allow yourself to get cheated by a guy like Onii-chan! Please be more wary!"

"Ara? Shizuka-san, what is not allowed, and what should I be wary of?"

"That's right Shizuka, we totally don't understand what you're trying to say. You have to be more straightforward."

Against Shizuka's complaint, Godou and Yuri refuted in unison.

They did not plan this in advance, it was merely by chance. However, that kind of timing and the synchronization of their actions was uncanny.

"... Well, what Shizuka-san wanted to say was dishonest was this. The status quo of being flanked by two beauties, me and Yuri, at all times."

Erica interjected, giggling.

Since the start when Shizuka had been voicing out her grievances, she had pretended to be only a bystander.

"The quiet, unsociable Onii-sama that you've always been monopolizing since before High School is now being waited upon by girls like this, causing you to want to say that... Well, it's not that I don't understand how you feel."

"E-E-E-E-E-Erica-san, please don't get a strange misunderstanding!"

There was such an impression of Shizuka becoming unusually flustered, after being told that in a know-it-all air —

■■■

"No-normal? You bastard, are you trying to say that you can only act normally to a sister like that!?"

"But, that's how it is. I think we get along well, even as a high school student and a middle school student, we're still pretty close. "

In the many times where the parents had been absent during their childhood, no matter where he went he had always brought his sister along.

Reminiscing, Godou felt nostalgic.

Continuing to do so after the siblings had hit puberty, it would be very awkward... Perhaps Shizuka's constant tagging alongside him recently was because of nostalgia, too?

"Kuhaa!?"

As though smashed over the head by a blunt weapon, Sorimachi cried out.

It seemed as though he had suffered a great shock from Godou's reply.

"Get a hold of yourself, Comrade S!"

"I-I'll be fine. More importantly, we have to make clear the crimes of Kusanagi. Listen well, Kusanagi, what you say is normal, a real Imouto being [normal], when she's so very cute! Which part of that do you not understand!"

"..... Huh?"

Godou faltered before this outcry from Sorimachi, about the truths of this world.

"Yep, just as Comrade S has mentioned! On the contrary, your sarcasm is unbearable!"

"Agreed! Shizuka-chan is, for sure, the model of a tsundere Imouto. 'Onii-chan you idiot, it'll be great if you were a little more concerned about me... but I love you....'"

"Comrades, thank you thank you! Yes, this is Imouto moe. Imouto moe!"

These guys, did they drink themselves drunk?

Before the idiot trio's rousing cheers, Godou suspected that they were either drunk or on drugs. And, although this was rather inconsequential, Takagi's purposeful usage of girly abusive language was disgusting. If he were to point this out, that guy would undoubtedly be dealt quite the blow...

"Well then, it's about time for us to announce the third crime. It is about that incident with Mariya-san."

Nanami suddenly spoke out.

"Ever since middle school, for the longest time, she was known as the number one bishoujo on the campus, and now in high school, after the appearance of Erica-sama, she has become one of the two great bishoujos, her shining charm not fading a single bit, that Mariya Yuri-san, and yet — "

Godou was perplexed. Monopolizing the girls, what false accusations were they trying to make?

"You bastard, how many of these girls have you recently laid your hands on? Averting your gaze whenever you make eye contact with them, and at other times looking into each other's eyes while your cheeks blush red, creating a world belonging to the two of you!"

"I-I saw that too! Kusanagi and Mariya-san were walking side-by-side when their hands suddenly brushed against the others, and then the two of them looked downwards seemingly embarrassed, stopping in their tracks!"

"Shit! This guy is enjoying a life filled with bittersweet love!"

Godou was confused.

He and Yuri shared that kind of odd atmosphere — it seemed like that might have happened before.

It was not that there wasn't anything of that sort in his memories. Thinking back, recently that has always been the case. Could it be that all these occurrences have been noticed by everyone!?

"Hmph, it seems he's aware of it. While flirting openly with Erica-sama, it seems he's entered Mariya-san's route as a side-route . How did he raise this many flags!!"

"In the middle of rushing through the two-timing harem route, hmm — ?"

"You bastard, enjoying all these good experiences by yourself. By our hands, we shall give you a bad ending!"

The idiot trio were howling and shouting. I give up.

He considered how he should persuade them. It was indeed a dead end situation, and just as Godou was wallowing in despair —

With a clank, the door of the classroom was opened. Sunlight immediately illuminated the dark interior, and then, a fair-skinned schoolgirl stepped into the room — it was Mariya Yuri.

"Godou-san, you were here? I've been searching for you."

With a gentle and sweet smile, Yuri said to him. However, upon seeing the figure of the tied-up Godou, her eyebrows were raised in question.

"... What exactly has happened to you? Why are you being bound?"

".... It's a long story, but Takagi, Nanami and Sorimachi here have been busy doing stupid things."

Godou replied, his answer brief and concise. Nevertheless, she had great timing.

She mentioned that she had been searching for him, hence her appearance here was no mere coincidence.

Mariya Yuri was a Hime-Miko that possessed the magical power of [Spirit Vision]. [Somehow], she could find what she was looking for by simply walking around, so this was not surprising.

Yuri rushed to Godou's side, who had fallen onto the floor.

Protecting the defenseless Godou, she declared imposingly towards the idiot trio.

"Although you have hidden your faces, you must be Godou-san's classmates, right? With this act of violence, what are you planning on? Three persons ganging up on a lone male student, is inexcusable barbarism. As a human, know the shame of your deeds!"

She cried out, charmingly so.

In the face of this awe-inspiring rebuke, the idiot trio exchanged glances with each other.

"F-for Mariya-san to intrude upon us in this kind of place!"

"Calm down, we still have the reins over the leadership! .... That's right, Mariya-san, if you want Kusanagi to be released, then you have to listen to our request! Firstly, a change of dress. Mariya-san who is known to work part-time at a Shinto shrine, we'll have you dress as a Miko-san!"

"Yep, and then we want you to draw a self-portrait in ketchup on omelette rice. A heart shape too!"

"E-e-e-e-e-e-e-e-e-e-ears, I want you to dig my ears! If possible, a lap pillow too!"

"Hmmmm. Then, I'd like you to put on nekomimi. A-and at the end of every sentence, add [Nyan]!"

Some strange things were suggested.

"..... Go-Godou-san, what are those people demanding of me? I feel like they've missed their footing severely, and made a mistake somewhere along their path as a human."

Yuri recoiled, before the disgraceful behavior of the idiot trio.

They were hopeless, Godou understood that fact. The unusual intensity of their delusions, in certain ways was even more terrifying than the fury of the few devil kings in the world.

"No need to push yourself, Mariya. It's dangerous (?) here, find and call Erica here. If it's her.... she'll be able to handle those guys. Probably."

"No way! Abandoning Godou-san and escaping by myself, I cannot do that!"

"Just go! There's no need to worry about me. Prioritize your own safety."

"No. — That time, in the middle of that rain, did I not say it? That I will be with you, through thick and thin. It's different when it is a hopeless situation, but in this case, my help seems like it will be of use. Even if it's me, if I do my best, certainly I ought to be able to help Godou-san out."

Before he noticed, while protecting Godou who was lying on the ground, Yuri had locked her gaze with his firmly.

I'm an idiot. Godou was moved by her zeal, and he changed his mind.

It was too early to give up. He had to believe in this girl's courage and strength more. Alone, it might have been difficult, but together, the two of them would surely be able to overcome any obstacles.

.... While thinking that, he turned his attention to the idiot trio.

They were crying.

Their knees bent, the paper bags worn over their head were wet and dripping with tears.

"Son of a bitch..... In many ways, you son of a bitch!"

"Even in this kind of situation, creating a world meant just for the two of you...."

"Ignoring us, and starting a love comedy by yourselves. Isn't this simply too sorrowful...."

Thus, the stricken idiot trio were rendered powerless, and Kusanagi Godou was released, somehow.

Passing the days with a stable and ordinary school life (according to him), the male student that he was, was in actual fact a godslayer, and bore a title that was conferred to only those who had usurped an authority.

— That title was 'Campione'.

The stories related to the godslayer devil kings, of whom there were only seven in the world, shall be told again in another tale.

Chapter 5 - The Rumored Campione

Tokunaga Asuka is in first year of high school.

She lives in the Nezu Sanchoume in the Bunkyou ward in Tokyo, a lively shopping district which leaves a strong small-town atmosphere.

The aura of the Showa era that was left here and there wakes a curious feeling of nostalgia.

Asuka works part-time in a family restaurant a little separated from that district.

A common place chain restaurant.

But because it is next to the main street, it is still thriving. It was early October when she saw a certain old friend during work.

On the first day of a long weekend, past eight o'clock in the morning.

Asuka was on morning shift and serving the customers.

Her long-time friend had not entered the store as a customer, but was killing time out front, holding a large bag. It looked like he was waiting for someone.

Kusanagi Godou.

Written in Kanji, every character needs a large amount of strokes, but that's the name of her friend.

He was tall and had quite pretty features, but because of the unsophisticated feeling he gave off, you wouldn't exactly call him good-looking.

Asuka knew him since kindergarten.

Because he was waiting where he was, he must have arranged to go somewhere by car.

Despite his ordinary looks, Godou had many unusual acquaintances. From time to time he used the pretense of job to help such acquaintances with their work. Certainly that day must've been the same, Asuka thought and returned to her work.

However, moments later, she suddenly found Godou surrounded by girls.

Furthermore, each of these four girls were either cute or just beautiful. There were even 2 beauties from abroad mixed in, one blond and one silver-haired!

"That guy... Looks like he's become quite a player lately. He wasn't that bad before! Unbelievable, to think he'd fall that quickly ...," Asuka hissed, deciding to teach him a lesson.

Meanwhile a mini van came to a stop in front of Godou.

Her childhood friend plus the four girls got in and drove away.

"...Wasn't that Godou-san just now?"

"Mariya-san and Erica-san, as well as Liliana-san were with him , right? Meeting early on the first holiday and leaving by car... I wonder where they are going."

Asuka overheard that quiet conversation.

Looking for its source she saw her fellow part-time workers. Miyama-san and Sawa-san were whispering to each other.

Like Asuka they were in first year of high school. Until a moment before, their eyes had been directed outside the family restaurant, where Godou and the girls had been.

Then Asuka understood.

She had heard before that those two were going to the nearby Jounan Academy.

"Sawa-san, Miyama-san, do you happen to know Kusanagi Godou?" Asuka asked them out of the blue.

It was past one o'clock. The morning shift was over and they were in the changing room now, switching out of their cute uniforms into street clothes. Being asked all of a sudden, Sawa-san and Miyama-san blinked with surprise.

"Well, we do know him, but...," Sawa-san nodded cautiously.

With the thin-framed glasses, she looked most intelligent.

"But how come *you* know him, Asuka-san? You're not going to Jounan, are you?" Miyama-san asked in return. She was of short stature and plain adorable.

Actually, she was so child-faced you could mistake her for an elementary school child.

"I'm from the same area, a shopping district nearby. And I went to the same elementary and middle school, too."

"So... you're childhood friends?"

"With that Kusanagi-kun?"

Sawa-san already started going into it while Miyama-san was completely surprised.

"Yes. I won't call it the regret of my life, but it has been rather unfortunate to be stuck with that idiot for so long. By the way, Miyama-san, what did you mean with 'that Kusanagi-kun'?" Asuka asked with a cold smile on her face.

It had been half a year at most since they had entered high-school.

Had her old friend gained such a reputation in such a short time ?

"Could you please think about it for a moment? Since I've known him for so long, I'd like to know what preposterous things he's been up to. Depending on the situation, I'll have to discipline him a bit..."

"I think it started around May," Sawa-san started calmly.

They had changed locations to a lively Japanese tea house in Nezu Sanchoume - Asuka's and Godou's home neighborhood.

"Until then, Kusanagi-kun had not stood out very much. Well, his face is okay and he is tall, so one girl or another might have been interested in him, but all in all he did not stand out. But ever since Erica-san came, everything has changed."

Sawa-san spoke distinctly and in an educated tone.

Apparently her intellectual glasses weren't just for show.

"Ever since that extraordinarily smart and athletic blond beauty who's fluent in Japanese on top of it showed up, coming all the way from Italy to chase after Kusanagi-kun, he has completely changed. Or perhaps his hidden abnormality has just come to light ."

"And after Erica-san, Mariya-san from our class was next..."

Bit by bit, Miyama-san also started talking.

Unlike Sawa-san, she spoke hesitantly. Kusanagi Godou's behaviour was just that far out there.

"Mariya-san is always so graceful, like a young lady, but before anyone knew it, she was already clinging to Kusanagi-kun like a maiden in love. They seemed like they would elope at any moment . But that Kusanagi-kun didn't settle with just two girls, no...!"

"Another girl, Liliana-san, came here from Eastern Europe because of him as well."

According to them, this one was a fairy-like beauty with silver hair.

Asuka nodded.

A blond girl and a Yamato Nadeshiko[4], as well as a silver-haired girl. It sounded like the girls she had seen outside the restaurant earlier.

"And there seems to be yet another girl from some other high school who sneaks onto our campus to see him. We often spot a girl around him in a uniform different from ours."

"So you see, Kusanagi-kun is a king in the middle of a harem of at least 4 beauties, maybe even more, so to speak. They call him the biggest monster since the founding of the school. But strangely enough, the girls don't seem to hate him for it."

"Maybe because he looks harmless at first glance and kind in some way...?"

"He doesn't have a strong presence during everyday life which might cause the girls to overlook it. Although he still seems to make a part of the boys extremely jealous of him."

The situation became clear for Asuka and she nodded again.

The smile on her face was a bit powerless.

"I see... so he went for quality over quantity since entering high school."

"Qua... quality over quantity?"

Asuka's absent-minded murmuring was interrupted by Miyama-san.

"Fourteen."

"Eh?"

"The number of girls in middle school who had fallen for that quiet, unsociable guy. Well, there may be more who I don't know of... And when you include the boys, it adds up to even more. Ohh , don't get the wrong idea. The last one is in the sense of camaraderie, not romantic love. Although in the baseball club with Godou there was that boy, Rui, who was quite border line..."

"EHH?"

Asuka's muttering flabbergasted Miyama-san. Sawa-san, too, was all ears.

"T-That's interesting. Just how did he manage to do that...?"

"There was nothing about it. He's just always had a way with a part of the girls and a part of the boys. But going into details now would take too long and it's bothersome, so let's do that some other time."

Asuka was making a sour face.

"Damn Godou. He doesn't seem like he's popular in class or school, but that appearance is deceiving. Even worse, he's completely oblivious to the girls who fall in love with him and tells them stuff like 'You're such a dear friend'. Unbelievable!"

Getting unintentionally worked up, Asuka's fist strikes the table .

"That sure is amazing... by the way, Asuka-san, are you also in love...?"

"...w-with Kusanagi-kun... or..."

"Huh?! Are you stupid!? Who'd fall for such a blockhead! You see, as his childhood friend I can't forgive him for causing all that trouble in our district or at school, okay? No misunderstandings, please."

"So that's how it is. Good going, Kusanagi Godou..."

"Right, it's so obvious... and kinda clichéd?"

During Asuka's unintentional outburst, Sawa-san's and Miyama-san's expressions had turned knowingly.

Both of them were focusing on Asuka.

On her two pigtails that, while a bit childish, Asuka herself is quite proud of. Her piercing eyes. Her slightly sharp features.

Sawa-san and Miyama-san were taking in all that and then nodded at each other.

"Hey, Asuka-san. Do you ever regret acting all rash and stand-offish in front of somebody you like?"

"A-as if I would! Don't make such weird accusations!"

"But the basic question is still why Kusanagi-kun is so popular."

"He's not super hot and he's neither a flirt nor does he impress by working really hard."

Once Asuka had calmed down, Sawa-san and Miyama-san continued.

"I-Isn't it because he's being raised by the ultimate playboy? With the best possible teacher right next to him, his natural talents or a kind of fate of being popular forever must have awoken, something like that?"

Just when Asuka was carelessly answering, that teacher caught her eye.

The three were still in the Japanese tea house.

Outside was still Nezu Sanchoume.

And down the street came quite the handsome old man. He was wearing an elegant linen jacket and he obviously must have looked stunning when he was younger. Just by walking down the street, people in shops here and there called out to him.

"Maybe... is that the one who taught Godou-kun?"

Noticing the direction of Asuka's gaze, Miyama-san guessed and was spot-on.

"That's right, grandpa Ichirou, his grandfather."

"Well, he does seem to be really popular, but what makes him such a playboy?"

"Uhm, how do I explain this...?"

It was when Asuka was pondering on Sawa-san's question.

Kusanagi Ichirou, the head of the Kusanagi family, walked right past the front of the tea house. He noticed her staring at him from the inside and responded with a wink. An unimaginable greeting for a Japanese man of his age. It was neither repulsive nor cold -- just the right balance.

He was someone able to do this completely naturally.

'No less from you,' Asuka thought when the tea house's phone suddenly rang. The lady at the counter (who also knew Asuka and Godou since infancy) picked it up.

And while Asuka in thought, the lady already came over.

She placed a plate of kurizenzai[5] usually made for the Obon-festival on the girls' table.

"Auntie, we didn't order this."

"Hehe, it's fine. Ichirou-san called just now and asked me to give them to you."

"Grandpa Ichirou did!?"

"Yep. You had such a serious expression so he wanted to get you something to cheer you up, he said. He was worried his grandson was giving you some trouble."

In just the instant of walking by, he had understood that much.

And although he quickly ordered over the phone and on tab, the old waitress didn't make an upset face even for a moment. If anything, she looked so happy that she could be of help to him, she must have been pleased instead.

Furthermore, there were 3 portions of kurizenzai on the table.

He had even thought of Sawa-san and Miyama-san...

"And well, seeing how he can pull this off with room to spare just shows how good of a playboy Grandpa is."

"...I think I just had a revelation."

"...Chip off the old block?"

"That grandpa is the one who's looked after Godou since he was a child. And since he took Godou out to all kinds of places, how he dealt with the different kinds of people they met must have lodged itself deeply into Godou's young mind."

According to Godou's own stories, there were various events in his past.

For example when he encountered an old lady who his grandfather had "some episodes" with. Or when he met a middle-aged woman who had a crush on his grandfather long ago. Or about that drinking party with someone indebted to his grandpa who had evidently strayed from the right path. Or maybe when his grandfather flew to some remote region in South America to help out an old friend of his...

"He grew up seeing any amount of those stories and the skills that made Grandpa Ichirou so generally popular. They were carved into him, right down to the bone. That's what makes him so absurdly popular... or so I think from time to time, even if it sounds ridiculous..."

She couldn't determine whether she was right or wrong. It was just a guess of hers.

"...but... there is one thing I'm worried about. And it seems likelier and likelier that it's going to happen in the near future," Asuka said while poking the kurizenzai with her chopsticks. "You see, that idiot has internalized his grandfather's skills since he was a little brat. Even if he doesn't realize what he can do right now... What if he gets used to girls and wants to be popular by himself?"

When Asuka finished mumbling, the others had guessed what she meant.

"I-I see... With the know-how of his grandfather who is this good inserted into him, once Godou-kun starts using it out of his own accord...," Miyama-san follow up timidly.

Apparently the short girl was quite perceptive.

"E-Even now he's playing with girls like some devil king, and you talk about him adding the wiles of that unbelievably popular grandfather? Wouldn't that turn him into a genuine monster?" Sawa-san tensely added.

"Not only I, but his little sister Shizuka and his deceased grandmother have also been worried about this since long ago."

Sawa-san and Miyama-san had realized a fear about the near future Tokunaga Asuka and a part of the Kusanagi family's women had borne for a long time.

Thinking about where Kusanagi Godou had gone over the long weekend, the girls let out long sighs.

Chapter 6 - Extra Story: The Illustrious Sage, True Lord Erlang

Part 1

"Great misfortune huh..."

Looking at the strip of fortune telling paper he had drawn on a whim, Godou muttered.

Since he was not a superstitious person who believed in fortune telling, Godou's only response was to smile wryly.

This happened on his way home from school, when he visited the Nezu Shrine by chance.

"Oh dear. Something interesting is written here."

Erica commented beside him as she looked at the fortune in his hand.

In contrast, Erica, who had also come along for her fortune, had drawn the impeccable outcome of "great fortune."

"The one who keeps watch, the nemesis is coming. Matters of conflict, evasion would be good fortune. —Isn't this predicting a desperate situation in the next battle?"

"That so?"

Godou replied nonchalantly and shrugged.

"I believe that avoiding conflict with any kind of god would be considered good fortune. That's definitely correct."

Less than half a month had passed since the battle against the heretic god with the monkey appearance in the land of Nikkou—on the plains of Senjougahara.

The invincible war god with vast divine powers and carrying the attribute of steel. In terms of pure combat power, he was the most powerful opponent Godou had ever fought to date.

However, Godou had also faced off against deities on the likes of the ancient Middle Eastern divine king as well as the goddess of wisdom who concealed a true serpentine nature.

Oh well, they were pretty much all the same in the fact that every single battle was very difficult.

In other words, a seven-hundred-story building looked pretty much the same as a seven-hundred-and-fifty-story building when viewed from the ground. Something like that.

In response to Godou's sloppy perspective—Erica simply went " You're not incorrect" but supplemented:

"However, I am very interested in the one described as Godou's 'nemesis.' Although your nemeses seem to number many, in actual fact, that's not always the case."

"Well, after all, most heretic gods simply do as they please, so their crimes eventually catch up to them."

Realizing what Erica was getting at, Godou answered.

As a Campione, the authority Kusanagi Godou wielded consisted of Verethragna's transformations, the [Ten Incarnations]. Each incarnation had its own stringent usage conditions, such as requiring the target to be a great sinner who had caused the people to suffer, etc.

Moreover, in general, most [Heretic Gods] committed atrocities repeatedly without being self-conscious of them.

Furthermore, Godou's source of power, Verethragna the guardian god of justice, could be described as the nemesis of such evil.

In terms of compatibility, one could conversely describe Godou as the nemesis of heretic gods instead.

In particular, both the white stallion that destroyed the people's enemy with scorching flames as well as the warrior who wielded the sword of light for tearing apart evil gods could be considered powerful trump cards against the majority of gods.

But Godou realized at this moment that the other girl in his company looked like she wanted to say something.

Namely, the girl who had drawn "middle fortune."

"What's the matter, Mariya?"

"No, nothing much, just something slightly concerning..."

The prim and proper Yamato Nadeshiko answered vaguely as if feeling rather troubled.

However, Godou encouraged her to speak, casting a glance that said "Go on and tell me." Yuri timidly spoke up:

"After listening to your exchange just now, I keep getting an uneasy feeling. I wonder if Godou-san might in the near future encounter an opponent with rather unfavorable natural advantages—an existence akin to a nemesis..."

The Hime-Miko Mariya Yuri possessed the power of [Spirit Vision].

Compared to drawing great misfortune, the fact that Yuri felt something "concerning" meant far more to Godou. Falling into silence, Godou exchanged glances with Erica beside him.

Was yet another troublesome battle coming in the near future...?

In hindsight, this was perhaps the incident's starting point.

The next day after the fortune drawing—

Godou and Yuri were heading to the Arakawa ward together after school.

They were both in uniform because they headed straight from school. This was not some personal matter. Otherwise, the blonde and silver-haired girls would probably have followed along.

However, those two girls had matters they had to attend to separately today.

The girl who had appointed herself as Godou's grand chamberlain was set to meet up with them slightly later. But before that, Godou and Yuri were alone together. Godou could not help but feel quite shy. After switching to the train, they reached the station closest to the destination and finished the journey on foot.

Although Godou did not ask, he felt that Yuri must surely be feeling the same way.

Walking side by side, they exchanged few words, most probably affected by the mood. Both Godou and Yuri were unaccustomed to the opposite sex. This was obvious from the current atmosphere.

However...

Very incredibly, Godou did not feel uncomfortable in spite of that.

Walking shoulder to shoulder, the distance between Godou and Yuri was slightly too intimate if they were merely fellow students from the same school.

Separated by only centimeters, all Godou had to do was reach out slightly if he wanted to touch Yuri's hand.

"I-If little children were in this situation, perhaps they would hold hands..."

Yuri suddenly whispered softly, bowing her head shyly.

Were Erica in her place, she would probably have taken Godou's hand directly as she spoke.

However, the Yamato Nadeshiko beside him was probably not going to do something like that. Instead, she smiled with a shy expression on her face. Godou smiled gently in response.

This was enough. Somehow, he always felt a sense of mutual connection in their thoughts and feelings.

Ever since the commotion at Nikkou city, this feeling persisted between Godou and Yuri.

Despite talking little, there was a sense of solace as they walked casually together, their destination entering into view.

This was a certain shrine not far from the Sumida River.

There were a few dozen people gathered on the visiting road beyond the entrance torii.

It happened to be the day of a temple fair, hence the many stalls present.

One could find the usual stalls selling takoyaki, roasted sausage , fried pancakes with assorted vegetables, cotton candy, chocolate bananas etc.

"This sight makes me a little nostalgic. I feel like buying something to eat."

"Is that so? In that case, let us go check it out later."

Yuri suggested in response to Godou's unintentional mutterings .

Godou immediately nodded to concur. But compared to a temple fair, they had more pressing matters to deal with first. Yuri proceeded to walk in front, leading Godou to their destination.

The pair left the lively and bustling visiting road and passed through the protective forest.

Entering the confines of the shrine, Godou could not find any signs of the priests and shrine maidens who were supposed to be present. Perhaps they were busy with various tasks and managing the temple fair.

However, there was probably an additional reason why the shrine personnel could not be found.

Namely, they voluntarily stayed away, knowing that the Devil King Campione was visiting on this day—

"I've been waiting for you, Onii-sama!"

Coming out from within the shrine to greet them was a young girl dressed in a miko outfit.

Mariya Hikari. Despite being a sixth grader, she was an apprentice Hime-Miko who possessed the special power of [Disaster Purification]. In addition, she was Yuri's younger sister.

"All the preparations are ready. Please come this way."

Hikari was a precocious girl, wise beyond her years.

Smiling cheerfully, she displayed affection as she nimbly led Godou and Yuri towards the worship hall. Godou nodded and followed behind her together with Yuri.

The interior of the worship hall was quite vast but rather dimly lit. Naturally, it was of wooden construction.

Furthermore, there were a few strange objects here—rather, there were dozens of them lined up.

White statues bearing human form.

Upon careful examination, these solid shapes were made of salt.

All were male with ages ranging from twenties to forties. The expressions on the salt statues' faces displayed surprise or fear. Most of them were dressed in suits.

For an instant, they felt like living humans. Such was the realism exhibited by the exquisite detail of these salt statues.

"These people, could they all be members of the History Compilation Committee...?"

"Yes. They were the ones who were transformed into statues of salt by the Marquis' authority when Marquis Voban came to Japan back in June..."

Yuri answered Godou's question.

The most ancient Campione, the Marquis—Dejanstahl Voban had visited Japan for the purpose of obtaining Mariya Yuri's rare and exceptional spirit vision.

After Godou fought him to a "draw," the Marquis had returned to Europe—

These salt statues before Godou's eyes were his parting gifts.

Pierced by the demonic gaze of Marquis Voban's glowing eyes of emerald, everyone was transformed into salt.

This was the authority that the elderly Campione had usurped from a certain demonic deity.

"The Eyes of Sodom... That was what the Witenagemot named this authority."

The History Compilation Committee's Amakasu Touma had explained this yesterday.

"According to reports, all it took was one glare to turn living humans entirely into salt... Furthermore, if the Marquis felt like it, he was capable of turning thousands or even tens of thousands of people into salt instantly. All the people who witnessed the city of

Sodom's destruction by God's flames were transformed into pillars of salt—This authority was named in reference to its simple ability to recreate the story recorded in the Old Testament of the Bible."

Amakasu normally displayed a inexplicably delighted expression whenever he said anything profound of this sort.

However, he was speaking with a helpless tone of voice when he delivered the explanation yesterday.

Furthermore, he was the one who made the request to Godou, asking him to attempt neutralizing the effects of the demonic gaze.

"I seem to recall it being said that it was a power usurped from the deity Balor?"

"Is that it...? Somehow, that is not the feeling I get..."

Godou muttered as he looked at the salt statues standing haphazardly before him while Yuri whispered cautiously.

"Could it be, you saw something?"

"Y-Yes. One-eyed... Body clad in armor. I think it should be ancient—a divinity from European lands. A one-eyed war god...?"

Yuri stared behind the salt statues.

The miko with exceptional spirit vision should be able to discern the appearance of the deity who supplied the authority that had been applied to the salt statues. Speaking of which, Godou recalled something in particular.

Marquis Voban was synonymous to the authority of "wolves."

This was a power that appeared to stem from one of the monstrous wolves of Norse mythology, but in actual fact, it was an ability usurped from the Greek god of the sun, Apollo.

"That old gramps was already a Campione before the Witenagemot's founding, so the information back then might not necessarily be accurate..."

On the other hand, Yuri's vision powers, which were capable of catching partial glimpses of the truth despite a total lack of clues, should be praised greatly instead.

If that was the case, perhaps Yuri might be able to discern more important information?

As Godou cast an inquiring gaze at her, Yuri shook her head apologetically.

"That is all I can currently see. The sacred name of the god who created this authority still eludes..."

"I guess Verethragna's [Sword] can't be used after all."

"However, I can indeed see that the curse placed by the Marquis has weakened compared to before. In that case, perhaps the method Amakasu-san suggested might succeed in lifting it."

Godou nodded at Yuri's comment.

Did the effects of Campiones' authorities weaken with the passage of time?

With this question in his mind, Godou decided to test things out .

During the period after the battle against Voban, Godou had obtained a new power despite the fact it was not his intention.

"Hikari, after we absorb the power as much as possible, the rest is up to you."

"Yes. Leave it to me, Onii-sama!"

Mariya Hikari agreed cheerfully.

The spirit power she wielded, disaster purification, was the special ability to neutralize all magical power and wizardry. Even the authorities of gods or Campiones could be nullified in part.

Naturally, it did not have the power to erase Marquis Voban's authority.

But if they did it this way...

If this curse of salt which had weakened for some unknown reason was further drained by Godou, then—

"Ama no Murakumo, please."

Godou spoke softly to his right arm, where the divine blade Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi resided.

This was the "partner" he had obtained after the commotion in the Netherworld. After surviving the battle at Nikkou, Godou had come to a basic understanding of how to use it.

This divine sword, with its long history, possessed the trait of magical power absorption.

Using this divine sword to absorb the magical power applied by the Marquis' authority, the curse of salt transformation could very well be weakened substantially.

Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi suddenly manifested in Godou's hand.

It took on a form that could just barely be considered a Japanese sword. The gently curved blade was quite similar to that of a katana, but was in actual fact the recreation of an ancient Japanese blade called the Warabite-tou.[6]

In addition, Ama no Murakumo's blade was an ominous jet-black color—

Godou casually made a thrust with the dangerous-looking " partner" known as the divine sword.

"Let me absorb the power remaining from that old gramps!"

"Efficacious signs of the bearer of Fortune, I implore your manifestation!"

As Godou gave orders as he wielded the divine sword, Hikari also chanted spell words to use her spirit powers.

There was a reason why the people who were turned into salt statues had been transported to this particular shrine. Reportedly, this place worshiped as its main deity Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi's guardian—Haya Susanoo no Mikoto.

Apparently, going to suitable lands was necessary to increase the divine power of Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi.

It was mentioned earlier that members of the History Compilation Committee had gathered at this place to perform wizardry rituals. As the divine sword's blade released its power, Hikari also applied her spirit powers.

In the next instant, Yuri's eyes widened with surprise.

Although the current time was before five in the afternoon, the sky had already begun to darken.

Having completed their task, Godou and Yuri were walking along the shrine's visiting road.

People were gathered around the fair stalls in bustling crowds.

Wandering aimlessly among them, Yuri turned towards Godou with a gentle smile on her face.

"It went quite smoothly for now. Quite a relief."

"Oh well, hopefully there won't be any lingering side effects in the future."

Combining Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi and Hikari's spirit powers, the intended result was achieved.

After receiving a phone call from Amakasu who was currently absent due to handling other tasks, they were informed that he was coming to settle remaining matters once he became free later.

Before he arrived, Godou and the girls decided to tour the shrine festival first.

Hikari went off to change from her miko outfit to casual clothing, thus leaving Godou and Yuri alone together.

"I'll simply go buy some food from the stalls to take care of dinner. I think grandpa and Shizuka both said they were coming home late tonight."

"Shizuka-san? But there are no activities at the tea ceremony club today."

"She said she had some kind of promise to fulfill."

Godou and Yuri conversed as they strolled through the festival at a leisurely pace.

Whenever their gazes met, Yuri smiled calmly.

Without saying much, they simply enjoyed each other's company with a sense of inexplicable delight. Surely Yuri was feeling the same thing. Speaking of which, since they had come directly from school, both of them were still in uniform.

Taking a detour on the road home from school to spend time peacefully with pleasant company.

This was precisely the lifestyle of ordinary—or rather, normal students. Just as Godou was struck by this realization that a high school student was not supposed to experience...

Yuri tugged at the sleeve of his uniform.

"G-Godou-san. Over there is..."

"What's up, Mariya... Uh, why on earth would she be here?"

Godou shifted his gaze in the direction indicated by Yuri.

A fried noodles stall.

The girl tending to the stall was standing before a massive iron griddle, a spatula in each hand, boldly and vigorously stir-frying a great amount of Chinese noodles, bok choy, pork and other ingredients.

Dressed in a yukata, she resembled a delivery girl with great sense of presence. She was someone whom Godou knew very well.

"Shizuka, what are you doing here?"

"Ooh—? Onii-chan and Mariya-senpai!?"

The little sister looked up with an expression of surprise. This was a chance encounter at an unexpected location.

"I am helping out because of old man Asakusa's request."

Shizuka explained as she stir-fried noisily.

Her bold and vigorous stir fry technique, which contrasted greatly with her slender feminine physique, was taught by the aforementioned old man who lived at Asakusa—an elderly man who could be described as the Kusanagi siblings' distant relative, now already deceased.

Unlike grandfather Kusanagi's Casanova ways, old man Asakusa was an upstanding son of Edo.[7]

Although he lived a life of solitude and never married, his commercial business "Ichiya" was inherited by someone who stayed in touch with the Kusanagi family.

"Come to think of it, these stalls are also run by the Tekiya guilds."[8]

"Tekiya... What kind of business is that? I have never heard of it."

Naturally, while the siblings chatted about their relative, the one who inquired was the sheltered highborn lady unfamiliar with worldly matters.

Before Godou could answer Yuri's question, the younger sister swiftly motioned with her eyes. Do not explain in too much detail—That was what her gaze seemed to be saying.

"...Anyway, it's the job of setting up stalls at various festivals and fairs."

"...They even go to the beach during summer and ski locations in winter."

"Well, it sounds like an interesting job."

Yuri displayed a pure and innocent smile in response to the siblings who evaded the topic of a certain unnamed profession and business that "was barely considered a legitimate business nowadays."

As a side note, the old man mentioned by Shizuka was a celebrity who had opened a new era as a gambler in his youth, with a Kurikara dragon tattoo on his back. Even VIPs from the " industry" attended his funeral.

"If you told me beforehand, I could have helped out as well."

"Considering how busy you've been lately, Onii-chan, the phone call was only made to me. Oh well, after all, you'd simply reject the request anyway."

Shizuka's adorable face cast a severe glare at Godou.

Feeling her disapproving accusation, Godou replied with displeasure.

"Don't go throwing random accusations. Even for me, if an acquaintance made a request..."

"Onii-chan, are you having a date with Mariya-senpai today?"

"D-Date!?"

Shizuka's observation caused Godou to jump in fright.

"Idiot. How could you say something like that?"

"Look who's talking. Let me ask you, what else could it be?"

Glaring severely, Shizuka spoke.

"Without even going home first, you came here directly after school. Just the two of you. The situation is plain as day."

" "....." "

Godou fell into helpless silence. Yuri also gulped.

Only when Shizuka pointed it out to them did they realize that the current situation was rather difficult to explain clearly.

It was not as if they could honestly say they came to the shrine here to clean up a mess left behind by the old monster from eastern Europe, right? But were Godou to attempt deception, he would be in trouble once he got home later.

Just as he was about to give up, Godou remembered.

The oracle Yuri had received a few days ago. About meeting a nemesis in the near future or something like that. Could it be referring to Shizuka?

But for one's own little sister to be the nemesis seemed a bit much... Just as Godou muttered such words to himself—

Yuri suddenly spoke up beside him.

"E-Excuse me... Godou-san, Shizuka-san, a so-called date refers to the act of a male and a female going out together to enjoy a delightful time together... Is that correct?"

Yuri sought confirmation in a greatly flustered manner.

For such a basic question to be asked when things had already come to this, not only Godou but also Shizuka were stunned. The two siblings nodded emphatically at the same time.

Then Yuri suddenly said the following with a surprised expression:

"What should I do... I, today is my first date..."

"Eh!?"

"B-Because it was just Godou-san and me, the two of us, like this, together all this time—"

Wrong, totally wrong! Didn't we agree that your little sister Hikari was coming along slightly later?

Feeling compelled to voice these words, Godou was just about to speak. However, when he noticed Yuri's inexplicably happy expression despite her flustered state, he could not bring himself to deliver the words for some reason.

"A-As I thought, this could be considered our first time experience, right..."

"W-Well, perhaps so... Maybe."

"I-I think so too."

"R-Really?"

"S-Should be?"

As her slightly moistened eyes pleaded, even Godou found himself reacting in unexpected ways.

Instantly, he nodded. I suppose one could view it that way. Thinking that to himself, Godou had a subtle feeling. But very quickly, he would forget all about such matters.

Because he saw Yuri smiling with happy satisfaction, which naturally caused the corner's of Godou's lips to move in turn. The end result consisted of Godou and Yuri smiling as they exchanged gazes right in front of Shizuka.

"Guh...! I can't believe you're completely ignoring the fact that your younger sister is watching!? Even grandpa hasn't reached this level yet!"

Shizuka began to get angry on her own, greatly increasing the forcefulness of her noodle stir-frying motions.

In terms of colorful and abundant female relationships, the grandfather was unparalleled in his Casanova ways.

Godou frowned in response to Shizuka's use of this problematic character to prove her point.

"Grandpa simply avoids letting his family witness the behavior he's ashamed of. As for Mariya and me, we're just good friends. There's nothing to feel guilty about."

"Ah yes, there is nothing about the relationship between Godou-san and I that does not hold up to public scrutiny."

Godou asserted and Yuri immediately concurred.

Ever since the Nikkou commotion, Godou and Yuri as well as Liliana started attaining a sort of secure state of mind in this area of mutual agreement. Was it because the cohesion of shared destinies had intensified, or they had simply started to accept things...

"A-Although lately I've been getting the feeling you're advancing rapidly along a shameless rascal's path, Onii-chan, I never expected even Mariya-senpai to get involved, given her inexperience in worldly matters! Onii-chan, this sort of growth and development is a bit excessive—"

"Instead of talking about this, aren't the fried noodles ready?"

"Oh no."

Reminded by her older brother, Shizuka immediately calmed her wrath. Holding spatulas in both hands with great familiarity, she packaged the large amount of noodles into separate plastic containers.

Not being picky eaters could be said to be the virtue shared by the Kusanagi siblings.

No matter the quantity of food filling the dining table or how unpalatable cuisine they faced, not only the brother but also the sister possessed the special skill of eating everything without wasting anything.

"Stop acting all lovey-dovey before me, okay. Onii-chan, regarding your indiscretions in female relationships, there are countless examples I could point out to show your need for restraint. Anyway, leaving the topic for now, would you like to eat some of this?"

With a seemingly generous tone of voice, Shizuka gestured towards a packed serving of fried noodles.

"Oh, please rest assured, Mariya-senpai. Despite the small size of this type of stall, all the ingredients bought are very clean. Also, I use water that I brought here myself by bucket rather than dirty pipe water. Hence, there are absolutely no hygiene issues."

Indeed, the junk food sold at stalls did seem quite ill-suited for the high-class lady. Despite Shizuka's domineering personality, she was actually quite considerate of others.

She must have been making use of the labor provided by "old man Asakusa's young employees" who were originally stationed at this stall. Seeing none of them around, Godou presumed Shizuka had ordered them to go buy something or other.

As she listened to Shizuka's words, Yuri's eyes began to shine—

Godou suddenly felt his body suddenly shake and fill up entirely with power.

This was his body's preparation for an imminent battle.

Because he sensed a deity nearby who must be defeated, as a god-slayer—a Campione, his body and mind had entered a combat state.

"...Sorry, but Mariya and I still have things to do. We'll come over again later."

Godou immediately looked at Yuri. Possessing spirit senses more keen than anyone else's, the Hime-Miko also sensed the divine presence and nodded instantly in return.

"Excuse us, Shizuka-san. We shall be back shortly."

"Oh okay. Oh by the way, Onii-chan, don't you go bringing Mariya-senpai over to anywhere strange, okay!"

Godou left the stall together with Yuri who was bidding his sister goodbye seriously.

Listening to the reprimands coming from behind them, they gradually left the visiting road where the temple fair was being held and entered the protective forest.

Despite having no idea what was going to happen, Godou decided it would be best to go somewhere with fewer people around.

Godou and Yuri ran rapidly through the silence of the mixed forest.

They decided to head towards the shrine interior for now. There should not be any people in this direction apart from Hikari and the History Compilation Committee members. Just at this moment, Yuri yelled loudly.

"Godou-san, look over there!"

Godou turned his gaze towards where Yuri was looking—a dark area deep in the mixed forest.

Amidst the darkness, Godou discovered a pair of refined and distinguished eyes. Just eyes only. Nothing else could be seen. No figure. Only two eyeballs floating in the air.

Moreover, the moment Godou sensed a divine presence from this pair of eyes—

A third eye opened. Above the pair of distinguished looking eyes, at the position corresponding to the forehead of a human face , a third eyeball appeared as a vertical slit opened.

At the same time, Godou was greatly stunned.

The massive expanding magical power always ready in a Campione's body—That magical power was suddenly reduced by 20%.

Godou instinctively felt that the third eye had taken the power. Taking away from the Campione's body the magical power that acted as the source of his authorities—What sort of deity had manifested with this kind of trait?

Just as Godou began to ponder the situation in preparation for the coming battle—

"O Bow of Jonathan, the warrior's weapon swift as an eagle and strong as a lion—!"

The spell words of David resounded all around.

An arrow of blue light flew from behind Godou and Yuri, aiming at the third eye that just opened. With astoundingly splendid archery, this eye was pierced right through.

"Are you okay, Kusanagi Godou!?"

The archer sprinted forth, accompanied by this stern voice. Without needing to glance at her face, Godou knew she was the silver-haired knight who had agreed to converge later—Liliana Kranjcar had finally arrived.

Godou nodded greatly in response to the appearance of this reliable comrade.

He then turned his attention to the enemy with the mysterious " eye." The three-eyed god who appeared in the depths of darkness had already left without a trace.

"What on earth was that thing just now..."

"Illustrious Sage—True Lord Erlang..."

As Godou's muttering escaped from his lips, Yuri responded in a tiny voice. Instantly, Godou turned to look at the Hime-Miko who was displaying a frightened expression on her beautiful face. Was it because she saw something?

True Lord Erlang.

This was the instant when Godou first heard this curious name.

Part 2

Within the territory of a certain shrine, Kusanagi Godou encountered the unidentified [Three Eyes].

Ten-odd minutes after that, Amakasu Touma arrived in a hurry. His true identity was actually a History Compilation Committee special agent descended from ninja(!) ancestors.

"Huh? Illustrious Sage, True Lord Erlang... So that's what Yuri-san said."

Amakasu frowned after he found out the name whispered by the Hime-Miko who had received a spirit vision.

Furthermore, the person in question who had spoken the oracle was not currently present. Due to the younger sister Hikari's massive exhaustion from using disaster purification so fully, her elder sister Yuri had taken her home.

"Amakasu Touma, I seem to recall that name as belonging to the Chinese pantheon..."

Liliana, who had arrived just earlier, inquired.

Even though her knowledge and experiences were quite extensive, Liliana originated from Europe after all. Consequently, she was not very well-versed in Chinese myths.

"You are correct, Liliana-san. He is a Daoist deity in charge of regulating floods, although his reputation for monster extermination is probably more famous. As implied by the two kanji characters in the 'Illustrious Sage' title."

Amakasu wrote down the two kanji in a notebook.

Illustrious Sage.[9] The one who illustrates—makes evident the sacred to manifest in the world...

"He is particularly renowned for the story where he subdued and captured Sun Wukong who was rampaging in both the celestial and terrestrial realms."

Godou recalled the name he had heard roughly half a month earlier.

—Family name Sun, given name Wukong. The self-proclaimed Great Sage Equaling Heaven. Descending upon the land of Nikkou once more, the war god in monkey form had announced thus.

"Could it be possible that the recent Great Sage Equaling Heaven is related to this incident?"

Liliana offered her opinion in her stern knightly tone of voice.

In her personal life, the silver-haired girl was presumptuously prone to blunders and easily shaken psychologically. But in combat and emergency situations, she was able to exercise 200% caution and composure.

"Correct again... As you already know, the deity stationed at Nikkou Toushouguu for the goal of protecting Japan from the threats of dragon and snake gods is precisely the magnificent Chinese hero, the Great Sage Equaling Heaven."

Amakasu exhaled as he explained.

"To this end, the Old One and other elders in the Netherworld put into place the [Keeper of the Horses] wizardry spell for sealing the Great Sage. In actual fact, the spell's core component has ties to the deity—the Illustrious Sage, True Lord Erlang—and is a sacred talisman carrying evil-slaying powers."

"The Old One... In other words, the deity named Susanoo who watches over Seishuuin Ena."

"Indeed. Since the Great Sage no longer exists, the talisman has lost its purpose. We of the Committee will undertake its retrieval.

However, because it is a rare and precious evil-slaying talisman, we decided to test it out to see if it was able to resolve a certain unresolved case."

"You mean the matter of nullifying Marquis Voban's authority?"

In response to Liliana's statement of surprise, Amakasu shrugged and smiled wryly.

"Oh dear, because I happened by chance to recall there were two elite masters among those involved in the incident, so for the sake of saving lives, a risk was taken."

"Don't go asking me to suddenly take on these kinds of risks! Come on, that's so wrong I don't even know where to begin!"

"So where exactly is this problematic talisman currently?"

"Even though they were confident things were under control, I cannot believe the History Compilation Committee's core leadership allowed such a completely irresponsible experiment to proceed."

Liliana protested, her anger surfacing slightly

A car from the Committee had just taken Godou and her to the vicinity of the Minato ward. Currently, the two were making their way to the new destination on foot.

"Thanks to them, Kusanagi Godou, you were attacked by that strange thing..."

"It's not really that big a deal. After all, the people who were turned into salt statues were saved."

Appropriately expressing his naturally generous character, Godou replied with sincerity.

However, Liliana had a serious personality and she seemed to be objecting.

"Of course there is nothing with saying that, but I always get the same feeling from Sayanomiya Kaoru as I do from Erica."

Sayanomiya Kaoru. This was the full name of the person they were going to pay a visit.

Although she was still studying in high school, she was already in charge of the History Compilation Committee's operations in the entire Kantou region.

"You say she's the same as Erica?"

"Yes. Unscrupulous in choosing means to attain goals—uh, scratch that, unscrupulous in choosing goals to enable their preferred means to be undertaken. That is the similarity I am talking about."

"...I see."

Erica and Kaoru both belong to the scheming intellectual type.

Moreover, neither of them were calm and dispassionate Machiavellians. So long as circumstances permitted them to do so, they were strange characters who infused vainglory and fantasy into their work, choosing to attain goals in the most amusing manner available.

As Godou and Liliana chatted, they soon reached the destination.

Just outside a school's main gates, many girls could be seen exiting the school.

They were dressed in black uniforms. Although the uniforms looked tacky and unfashionable on first glance, closer examination revealed a rather refined and distinctive design.

A prestigious all-girls school that prided itself on being one of Tokyo's top schools in academics and tradition.

"Kaoru-san is actually a high school student too."

And even a high school girl too. Godou muttered to himself with heartfelt feeling.

She was not only a member of the Committee's core leadership but also a high-ranking and accomplished Hime-Miko. However, in a certain way, her position was diametrically opposed to that of a "high school girl."

When Godou called her just now to see if they could meet as soon as possible, he received the following response:

"We are currently busy with preparations for the cultural festival. I won't be free until a little later."

Feeling a great dissonance in hearing words like school or cultural festival coming from her, Godou approached the school gates to pick her up.

Taking a spot close to the school gates, he began to wait for Kaoru.

Perhaps he would have found it difficult to remain unflustered to stand before an all-girls school by himself as a man. But today, Liliana was also present—

"What's the matter?"

Seeing the silver-haired girl bearing an anxious expression, Godou inquired.

They were both wearing the uniform of their school, Jounan Academy. Due to various reasons, Liliana was also quite conspicuous in appearance. As the girls leaving school successively stared at her, Godou could not believe how unsettled she became.

With a depressed expression, Liliana explained quietly.

"I have unpleasant memories in regards to closed environments like 'all-girls schools.'"

"Did something unpleasant happen in the past?"

"Yes. A few years ago, Erica and I were both stuck in an awkward situation where we needed to infiltrate an all-girls boarding school. All kinds of things happened at the time..."

"Speaking of boarding school, did you get bullied!?"

"No, rather, it could be described as the opposite. For some unknown reason, Erica and I became the centers of popularity. Because of the kind of girl she is, Erica was able to adapt and react quite flexibly. On the other hand, I..."

Godou nodded deeply.

Erica was able to become the center of popularity wherever she went. In addition, a girl like Liliana, who was not only beautiful but also sternly dignified, would be popular because of being situated in "that kind of organization."

"No matter what I was doing I found myself surrounded heavily by those girls, without even a chance to eat my meals alone in peace. So troubling. Furthermore, Erica apparently found it quite interesting. She even said that she should take the opportunity to hold a salon gathering."

"From the way it looks, Kaoru-san also seems to be quite popular here."

Just as Godou echoed with his own observation, his cellphone vibrated from an incoming call.

Rather than Kaoru, it was Yuri who had called. Over the phone, she informed Godou that she expected to meet up with the two of them after she took Hikari home.

"Shizuka-san asked me to pass this along."

Godou received the takeout container of fried noodles from the Hime-Miko who had just arrived in one of the History Compilation Committee's cars. It was still warm.

"Just before I took Hikari to the car, Shizuka-san gave me this when I went to bid her goodbye."

"Come to think of it, she did mention she was going to treat us to fried noodles."

"She also had a message for you, Godou-san."

Yuri began to speak hesitantly with shyness for some unknown reason.

"Shizuka-san vigorously requested I pass to Godou-san this message urging you to get along well with me. I cannot help but feel embarrassed to hear something like that from a member of your family, Godou-san..."

The younger sister must have been displaying her usual angry expression when sarcastically requesting the message to be passed along.

But for better or worse, the sheltered high-class lady who had trouble understanding seemed to be accepting Shizuka's words with a positive interpretation.

Despite the embarrassment she felt, Yuri was displaying a blissful expression.

Shocked by the way she looked, Godou speechlessly lowered his gaze towards the noodles. No seaweed had been added to the noodles, presumably because Shizuka was being considerate for the girl accompanying her brother.

On the other hand, Liliana commented slightly sardonically.

"If Shizuka-san said this much, it looks like you and Mariya Yuri must have been having quite a delightful time together before I arrived."

"D-Don't say anything bizarre like quite delightful."

"I-Indeed. Godou-san and I were simply... Simply on a date, that is all—"

"Oh I see, a date huh."

"M-Mariya. Could you please pick a more prudent choice of words?"

"Eh? I am very sorry, did I say something strange just now?"

"No. Thank you for your valuable information, Mariya Yuri..."

Seeing Godou's frustration and Yuri's confusion, Liliana murmured:

"On further thought, this is completely not unexpected. Kusanagi Godou, in those kinds of situations, all it takes is a momentary opening for you to make a move. Your superb skills are truly astonishing. Swift, comprehensive, full of natural cunning —"

"Wait a minute, Liliana. What do you mean exactly by 'those kinds of situations'!?"

"Opportunities to further your intimacy in female relationships, of course."

Liliana declared as though she were a master detective who had solved a mystery.

Just as Godou was about to protest, Yuri interjected before he could speak.

"P-Please do not judge so hastily. Although I have no objections in regards to assessing Godou-san as that type of person, the issue cannot be gainsaid completely."

"H-Hey, I'm the one objecting here."

"Godou-san. Do you not remember that you were the one who declared to Shizuka-san just now that our relationship is completely free from guilt?"

Even though Yuri did not necessarily offer full support, Godou would surely suffer her derision if he did not concur with her.

Despite being routed on two separate fronts, Godou still replied the following:

"Yes, that's true but I think calling it a date—"

"Given the current circumstances, how about Liliana-san join us as well for a double date?"

" "Eh?" "

Godou and Liliana's voices coincided in perfect unison.

"W-Well, a date refers to both genders spending time together enjoyably—Is there anything wrong with this definition? In that case, if that is what we all desire, I think there is no problem. Am I wrong?"

"...Somehow it does not feel exactly right, but I cannot assert it is wrong either."

Liliana murmured with a troubled expression.

"However, it feels like it is not exactly unacceptable... Oh well, since that female fox Erica is not among us three, I suppose it is fine."

"Liliana-san, please watch your language."

"No, Mariya Yuri. Perhaps you may not know because your time spent dealing with her is still short. That woman frequently seizes opportunities to play devilish pranks. Thinking back now, it is possible that Erica was partially responsible for my rapid rise to popularity in the boarding school..."

Caught up in Yuri's pace, Liliana began to rant upon the subject.

On the other hand, Godou breathed a sigh of relief for the temporary respite.

Although he felt that many seeds had been sown for future problems to sprout, after some consideration, he decided to ignore them for now.

These issues stemmed from a mixture of Yuri's forthrightness and unfamiliarity with worldly matters, Liliana's hidden outrageous facet as someone who was knowledgeable yet lacking in common sense, as well as Kusanagi Godou's natural carelessness.

Upon hearing of this trio's conversation that had taken place, a certain person would ridicule "Isn't this a farce played by the three stooges!?" This occurred slightly afterwards.

"Given this opportunity, why don't we eat Shizuka's treat while we wait for Kaoru-san to arrive?"

At Godou's suggestion, the trio made their way to a park near the school.

On the way, they visited a convenience store and bought some oden[10] stew, Chinese buns and bottled tea etc.

"Because I have never had this type of food before, it feels a little exciting."

"Indeed, even though these dishes cannot be said to be particularly healthy."

Prompted by a comment from the classy young lady who apparently never bought junk food snacks on her way home from school, the female knight responded as she bought convenience store confectionery with a partially critical expression on her face.

The trio sat down on a bench in the park and began to have a simple dinner.

Godou was the first to comment on his sister's cooking.

"Hmm. Not particularly bad tasting but nothing outstanding either. Standard fried noodles sold at stalls."

"Not really, the flavor of the sauce is quite savory."

"Do remember that this is the fruit of Shizuka-san's well-intentioned efforts."

Godou's tactless criticism was met with Yuri and Liliana's reprimands.

That said, this was simply stall food at a temple fair that never aspired to reach the pinnacle of B-class delicacies. Besides, compared to taste, cost would have been the primary consideration when purchasing ingredients.

In actual fact, in terms of cooking skill, Shizuka's level was similar to her elder brother's—Based on these three points, Godou's comment was completely tactless indeed.

The Kusanagi siblings were raised by the laissez-faire mother and the grandfather who was frequently away from home.

Completely undaunted by the prospects of cooking in the kitchen, nevertheless, they could not be described as particularly great chefs. In this regard, the two siblings were identical.

After the meal, Godou received a text message from Kaoru.

"I am truly shocked and awed to have the king personally come out here to greet me, Godou-san."

Saying that, Sayanomiya Kaoru bowed her head solemnly.

This was the action she took the instant she spotted Godou after exiting the school gates.

However, compared to her excessively exaggerated words, the smile appearing on her lips was easygoing. Her head-bowing

motion was also quite graceful. On the other hand, she usually displayed a slightly wry smile when performing this very Kaoru-style action.

Nevertheless, Godou could not help but ask:

"Kaoru-san... What is with this outfit?"

"Looks great, doesn't it? I had it specially made."

Kaoru's face displayed androgynous beauty as usual. Her body was also rather slender and exhibited her characteristic appearance that simultaneously resembled a beautiful girl and a handsome youth.

Like the sort of handsome youth who made appearances in traditional shoujo manga, her beautiful appearance seemed to be the stuff of dreams. Furthermore, Kaoru was dressed in gray uniform today. A male one.

"Isn't this an all-girls school? Doesn't this uniform(?) break school rules?"

"Fufufu. After all, I don't really like wearing sailor-style uniforms."

As if ignoring her gender recorded in the family registry, Kaoru declared:

"I simply prepared a uniform suitable for myself. Oh dear, it really took quite a lot of work for me to win over the teachers, the student council and the parent teacher association in order to be able to wear this outfit from day one."

She was probably referring to the clandestine tasks she undertook, making full use of her natural oratory and negotiation skills as well as her beauty and intellect.

While thinking it was such a waste for her to be squandering her rare talents on something like this, Godou summed up his critical reaction succinctly.

"Or from the very beginning, you could have selected a school that allowed students to wear casual clothing..."

"See, when a mountain stands in your way, it is only natural to want to climb over it. Besides, I quite enjoy ____ the uniforms here."

Her statement should probably be amended by filling the blank with the words "watching the girls who wear."

Godou secretly supplemented in his mind.

While they were conversing, girls passed by them one after another. They kept greeting Kaoru with bowed heads, using anachronistic greetings like "Good morrow, Kaoru-sama" or "Good greetings."

Everyone seemed to know Kaoru. Truly living up to the term " popular."

"By the way, since we have all arrived at the school gates, why did you send your request to me only by text message?"

That was why Godou had left Yuri and Liliana behind to receive Kaoru alone.

"If I was sighted together with girls like Yuri and Liliana, the girls in the school are going to get jealous. You're male, Godou-san , so it doesn't matter."

"...Normally, it should be the other way around."

Godou discovered he was apparently being used as a shield to handle her fans.

As Kaoru uttered taboo words incongruent with her identity as a female high school student at an all-girls school, Godou accompanied her back to the park.

Meeting up with Liliana and Yuri, they called a car from the History Compilation Committee. The next place they traveled to was a western mansion situated in Area 3 of the Chiyoda ward.

This was the Sayanomiya residence, the place where Committee members like Amakasu frequented.

Kaoru led Godou's entourage into the study.

"The sacred talisman with ties to the Illustrious Sage, True Lord Erlang... I never expected it would go as far as to attempt to harm you despite your identity as a Campione, Godou-san—My utmost apologies. Our predictions were apparently too naive."

"But anyway, why did it target me?"

Intrigued by the situation as she listened to Kaoru's apology, Yuri spoke up softly:

"Perhaps you were targeted precisely because you are Godou-san."

"Did you see something, Mariya? An oracle from spirit vision perhaps?"

"Oh no, nothing like that. It is a little difficult to explain at once.. ."

"...I see. I get it now."

Leaving Godou in clueless ignorance, even Liliana began to nod .

"If True Lord Erlang is a deity who vanquishes evil and upholds justice, then it is understandable why he would target Kusanagi Godou. After all, since he is the benevolent god who subdued the Great Sage Equaling Heaven, Sun Wukong, in the past, it stands even more to reason."

"You two truly amaze me. Come on and tell me what the reason is. I am completely clueless."

Despite Godou's request, the two girls seemed hesitant to speak.

As for Kaoru, she simply made a slightly wry smile as she cast an apologetic gaze at Yuri and Liliana.

After a brief moment, Yuri was the first to speak.

"Basically, since it is an evil-slaying artifact that can even weaken Marquis Voban's authority..."

"Kusanagi Godou, who has developed into a Devil King no way inferior to that elderly man, had also been judged as evil that must be vanquished."

Liliana's supplementary explanation made Godou realize with a shock.

"In other words, I have been judged as a person who repeatedly subjects the world to unspeakable acts of evil!?"

" "Apparently so." "

Yuri and Liliana expressed agreement simultaneously, causing Godou to bow his head in dejection.

On the other hand, Kaoru picked up a box made of paulownia wood from the desk in the study.

"Putting the reason for the incident aside for now, this is the talisman in question—Hmm?"

As soon as she spoke, a troubled expression surfaced on her dream-like face of a handsome youth.

She frantically opened the box, having apparently discovered something abnormal. Although not up to Yuri's level, Kaoru was still an outstanding user of spirit vision. Godou and the rest also gathered to peer into the box.

...It was empty. The paulownia box contained nothing inside.

"It was definitely still here yesterday, so when exactly did it..."

Just as Kaoru mused softly with a tone like a master detective showing interest in a mystery—

Godou shuddered once. Power suddenly surged through his entire body.

A "god" was nearby—Or rather, had already arrived?

Before Godou could locate the opponent's location, Yuri started to scream.

"Behind you—Behind Kaoru-san, Godou-san!"

Sayanomiya Kaoru was standing by the desk. Appearing behind her was the [Three Eyes] from earlier!

The young leader of the History Compilation Committee took action with great decisiveness.

Rather than turning to look back, she immediately ran in Godou's direction.

Since a being with the likes of a god or divine beast had manifested, there was no time for redundant actions. Only by taking cover behind the god-slayer as quickly as possible could one hope to find sanctuary.

Choosing this most appropriate measure without wasting a second, she swiftly put it into motion—

Indeed, her judgment was swift. However, it was still a step too late.

The [Three Eyes] floated up. The refined and dignified pair of eyes as well as the vertically oriented third eye. The pupils of the three eyes were infused with blue light simultaneously and glowed with brilliance.

Instantly, Kaoru's pupils also shone with blue light.

With a whoosh, Kaoru's slender body leaped gallantly, but not to hide behind Godou's back.

Instead, she sent a splendid spinning kick towards Godou's face . Profound mastery in martial arts were fully exhibited by her motions.

"Haa—!"

With a vigorous yelled, Kaoru unleashed a high kick with keen aim and speed.

Godou instantly bent down, almost losing balance and sitting on the floor.

Kaoru's leg swept through the spot at the height where his face had been. Had he failed to evade, the kick would have landed squarely and mercilessly. While confirming his judgment to be correct, Godou rolled over the carpet to distance himself from Kaoru.

Using the momentum from the roll, he immediately stood up.

Although the action was a little awkward, it did not matter. He had evaded the attack without injury and instantly renewed his posture.

"Please be careful! The will of True Lord Erlang inhabiting the Illustrious Sage's talisman has apparently taken control over Kaoru-san. It aims to vanquish you, Godou-san, who has been deemed evil!"

Probably receiving a spirit vision, Yuri gave a series of warnings .

From the way Kaoru looked, she definitely was not her usual self. Somehow gone were the dream-like beauty and libertine gaze that displayed curiosity towards everything. Flashing with blue light, her pupils were filled with stern fighting spirit, making her beautiful and courageous face even more striking in appearance!

Then the figure in the gray school uniform leaped again, intending to attack Godou once more.

"Please wake up, Sayanomiya Kaoru!"

Liliana swiftly inserted herself in between Godou and Kaoru.

Blue-eyed Kaoru extended her right hand as if intending to eliminate the interloper.

Raising her fist vertically, she sent a right hook towards the silver-haired girl's face. Godou watched with tongue-tied amazement. Like the kick just now, Kaoru was using Chinese martial arts.

Liliana blocked Kaoru's punch with her right arm.

She did not draw her beloved magic sword, probably to avoid harming Kaoru's body.

However, controlled by the "evil-slaying will," Kaoru nonchalantly swung her fist down on Liliana's arm.

The silver-haired female knight went "Ugh!?" in response, greatly alarmed and surprised.

However, she did not back down and was just about to grab and pick up Kaoru when—In the next instant, she was crouching on the ground.

This was the result of Kaoru's left index finger pressing on Liliana's chest.

"Guh. The technique known as pressure point attacking...!"

Crouched on the floor, Liliana groaned. Her body seemed immobilized by paralysis.

Attacking vitals and pressure points on the human body to subdue enemies effortlessly—

This was indeed a technique used by the Chinese demonic cult leader. The *Jiuweixue* pressure point was located on the chest. Godou had learned this piece of trivia from her direct disciple.

Next it was going to be his turn—

Just as Godou readied a stance, Kaoru went "Haa!" with another vigorous yell.

Then Yuri went "kyah" and collapsed, apparently losing strength in her lower body as a result of the yell. Furthermore, her legs extending out from beneath her uniform skirt were knocking together noisily as they trembled.

Apparently, Yuri no longer had the strength to stand.

Having neutralized a Hime-Miko with a vigorous shout, Kaoru turned towards Godou and approached.

Her strikingly beautiful face was like the midday sun.

Watching her expression which aptly conjured descriptions like "justice," "benevolence" or "hero," Godou muttered:

"...It wanted to avoid getting Mariya involved?"

Before Yuri could take any action like Liliana, a harmless method was used to neutralize her—

Was this a show of concern? The only "evil" that needed to be defeated was Kusanagi Godou alone. As if admitting to the doubts in Godou's mind, Kaoru's beautiful face smiled. Immediately, a bladed polearm appeared in her hand all of a sudden.

The double-edged trident—A great blade shaped into three prongs with sharp edges on the two lateral sides.

Rather than a Japanese weapon it was indeed a Chinese blade. Wielding the double-edged trident, Kaoru charged at Godou with great agility.

Erlang's mercy as the "benevolent one" could not possibly be extended towards Godou, probably.

Without any hesitation, Kaoru performed a downward diagonal slash.

Godou was not necessarily incapable of evading this double-edged trident.

The enemy before him was neither a great sinner who had caused the people suffering nor a user of monstrous strength beyond normal parameters. Given the opponent's level of martial technique, divine speed capable of handling the [Raptor] was very probable.

Under such circumstance, there was only one incarnation Godou could depend on.

The double-edged trident struck Godou's left shoulder. Slash—

The double-edged trident continued to tear through Godou's skin, muscles, collarbone, ribs etc, slashing its way towards his heart.

The only substance obstructing this attack was the bones of a Campione, possibly even tougher than the hardest metals on earth. Unimaginable heat and pain tore through Godou's body and mind.

Sacrificing his left shoulder to the slash wound, Godou was able to use the [Camel] incarnation in return.

He made it. The double-edged trident had yet to reach his heart.

Obtaining combat skills and leg strength that allowed him to fight war gods on equal footing in the past, Godou unleashed swift

forward kicks against Kaoru repeatedly. This was a type of kicking strike akin to shoving the opponent away using the soles of the feet.

Kaoru and her slender body was sent flying by his kick.

That said, this simply kicked her away. No damage had been caused to Kaoru's body.

Having gradually mastered his authority, Godou was now capable of restraining the [Camel]'s destructive power to a certain extent. Hence, he was able to perform martial arts like that—

After kicking Kaoru away with a forward kick, Godou turned and performed a spinning kick instead of lowering his leg.

This was followed by a high kick upwards. However, he did not make a direct hit.

Brushing past Kaoru's temple with his foot, he gave her a concussive blow to the brain. His aim was to cause a concussion with minimum damage in order to neutralize Kaoru.

Pulling it off without a hitch, Godou rendered Kaoru unconscious and she collapsed as though turned off by a switch.

Kaoru unconscious. Liliana paralyzed. And Yuri with her legs gone limp.

The three girls were in a rather awkward state. But at least a crisis had been averted.

After Godou nodded towards Yuri and Liliana who were still conscious, the two girls displayed relieved expressions.

"True Lord Erlang's will... Seems to have left the room already."

"Looks like it. But why did it possess Sayanomiya Kaoru instead of Mariya Yuri or me who were by Kusanagi Godou's side? Did it choose the person who had used the evil-slaying sacred talisman?"

Yuri and Liliana's exchange prompted Godou to recall.

Amakasu's words. "There were two elite masters among those involved in the incident, so for the sake of saving lives, a risk was taken." One of them was Kaoru while the other was—

A troubling premonition surged in Godou's heart. Could it really be...?

"If my premonition is correct, the next person he will try to possess is Seishuuin?"

The other person, who along with Kaoru had attempted to use the talisman related to True Lord Erlang, was indeed Godou's companion who carried the title of the premier Hime-Miko.

Greatly shocked, Yuri immediately took out her cellphone.

"I-I am going to try to see if I can contact Ena-san!"

Since she was only drained of strength in her legs, moving her upper body should be fine.

Operating with stiff movements, she called up the contact list and pressed dial. However, she quickly hung her head.

"The call is not going through..."

Godou could not help but look at his right arm.

The divine sword residing there was also supposed to be akin to a "partner" to Seishuuin Ena. Furthermore, despite the sword's usually undisciplined attitude in normal situations, its personality was actually quite meddlesome whenever conflicts were encountered.

In spite of vast separation in physical distance, it maintained a spiritual bond with Ena—

"Hey... If Seishuuin were to encounter any mishap, tell this to her."

Godou knew that he should take care of the girls right here.

But instead, he exited the study.

Rushing rapidly by himself along the corridors in the Sayanomiya residence, he made his way to the garden.

"Call out my name if you encounter danger. Only by doing so will I be able to save you."

Just as Godou finally walked out the entryway and looked up to gaze at the dark starlit sky above Tokyo—

Godou heard a faint call transmitted from somewhere faraway. —Your Majesty, Ena has a bit of a bad feeling over here, please hurry over.

Instantly, gentle wind began to swirl beneath Godou's legs.

The gentle wind formed a vortex that gradually increased in strength, soon becoming a powerful cyclone.

When someone in a dangerous crisis called out Godou's name, it allowed him to fly to their location. This was Verethragna's first incarnation, the gust of [Wind].

This power currently activated to transport Kusanagi Godou to some unknown location.

Part 3

Guided by the vortex of [Wind], Godou was brought to an unknown land.

Godou nodded, acknowledging the result of the instantaneous teleportation performed using Verethragna's authority.

Finding himself on a riverside strewn with gravel, Godou was confronted by a mixed forest's autumn leaves of vivid red. Clearly this was in a mountain forest somewhere. Seishuuin Ena, who had "summoned" Godou here, was a girl who trained in the mountains as if it were her daily homework.

She was currently a few meters ahead.

Ena usually wore that uniform from some high school who knows where. However, this time she was dressed Japanese style with a white kimono top, a red, male-style hakama and a pair of wooden *geta* clogs.

This attire was rather fitting for a miko and someone training in the mountains.

Furthermore, she was wielding a wooden sword in a stance.

Her blade was pointed towards a certain direction—a familiar set of three eyes!

A pair of slender eyes hovering in midair with a third eye that opened vertically. Godou yelled out:

"Seishuuin! That thing is apparently the will of a god called Erlang whatever!"

"Erlang... Could it actually be the Illustrious Sage, True Lord Erlang? This thing was trying to take over Ena's body, almost succeeding in its surprise attack."

While explaining nonchalantly, Ena still kept her gaze and the wooden sword directed towards the enemy.

But judging from the tone of her voice, she clearly did not feel like she was in danger. This was because she knew very well that she was the one who had invoked Godou's [Wind] incarnation. As

expected of the Hime-Miko of the Sword, her boldness was exceptional.

"Rather than an actual god, this thing would be better described as part of a god's will, left behind in the world... That's what it feels like. Because it doesn't seem to have a material body, Ena thinks that as long as one prevents it from possessing someone's body, there won't be much danger."

Godou nodded emphatically in response to Ena's words.

As the user of the mystic technique, divine possession, she was more experienced than anyone in the area of contact with gods. Together with the fact that she possessed instincts like a beast, Godou was convinced she must be right.

However, Godou and Ena immediately stared with their eyes wide open in surprise.

The sun had already set, giving rise to a starry sky above. Radiantly flashing blue spheres of light were now descending from the night sky.

These spheres of light floated down slowly like snowflakes.

The blue spheres of light landed on the three eyeballs. In the next instant, the three eyes transformed into the form of a tall young man—his handsome face bearing stern dignity and propriety. His attire was reminiscent of Beijing opera costumes, Chinese in style and rather colorful. It resembled the military leader costume the Great Sage Equaling Heaven had worn.

Furthermore, he still had three eyes as if it were the most natural thing in the world. The vertically-opening third eye was positioned on his forehead!

(Hereby stands the nephew of the Jade Emperor, the general commanding the forces of heaven and earth, bearing the name of Erlang the Illustrious Sage and True Lord. Kusanagi Godou, as the villainous Devil King, you are the target I seek to vanquish. Prepare yourself.)

The young man announced his name and smiled clearly and candidly.

This smile was filled with the sort of magnificence belonging to someone who was utterly convinced of his own righteousness.

On the other hand, the voice he used to announce his name was neither clear nor candid. Instead, it sounded like a whisper.

This loudness should not be audible normally, but through suspicious divine powers, the voice was delivered to Godou and Ena's earshot.

"It turned into... a god?"

"This is something along the lines of a god's legacy will or regrets combining intimately with a body."

This sudden change greatly surprised Godou and Ena. However, there was no time to ponder the matter.

True Lord Erlang manifested a bladed weapon in his hand. The front part of the blade was shaped into three prongs—It's the double-edged trident!

"Watch out, Your Majesty!"

True Lord Erlang swung the double-edged trident to slash Godou.

Before the weapon could reach Godou, Ena stepped before him and blocked its path, intending to protect Godou. However, her weapon was merely an ordinary wooden sword—Godou immediately called out.

"Ama no Murakumo! Go and help Seishuuin!"

Alerted of the situation by Godou, Ena immediately threw away the wooden sword in her hand.

Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi suddenly manifested in her empty hands. Similar in structure to a Japanese sword, the divine sword had a mildly curving black blade. Swinging the sword she called her partner, Ena slashed at True Lord Erlang.

The respective blades of the god and the Hime-Miko clashed together.

Then they began exchanging blows, two or three at a time—Godou and Ena were dumbfounded once more.

Finding Ena's sword attack too difficult to evade normally, True Lord Erlang took a great leap backwards. Indeed, Ena was a

master of the sword. Nevertheless, she should not be skilled enough to overwhelm a deity who was known as a warrior god of combat. Despite this being the case, why would he retreat...?

(—Hmph. Mobility is rather restricted since this is merely a crude body. I shall have to wait for some time. Once I grow accustomed to this body, I shall return for a rematch...)

The god whispered. Immediately after that, the three-eyed, handsome young man vanished like a puff of smoke.

"Oh? So that god appeared because of Ena and the rest? Sorry sorry."

"I have no intention of reprimanding you for that, but if you're going to apologize, a little more sincerity would be more appropriate."

After recounting the series of occurrences, Godou voiced his objections to Ena's airheaded apology.

According to Ena, this mountain was somewhere in a corner of Chichibu. She was training in the mountains as usual, using the deep mountain aura to cleanse and purify her body and mind.

"In that case, we'll just have to wait here for the strange god(?) to attack again. After all, he only came to this place for the purpose of targeting me. Plus deep in the mountains here, we won't be causing trouble to people and cities."

"Yes, understood. Let's do that."

Ena grinned and calmly expressed agreement.

In actual fact, Kusanagi Godou and Seishuuin Ena were surprisingly similar people. Both possessed animal-like instincts and personalities that tended to take action before worrying, thus allowing them to act decisively during emergencies.

Given these two as a team, prolonged strategy planning would be the last thing one would expect.

"Then the last issue is where we should wait for that guy to appear. Although we could just stay here, it's really quite cold."

Just earlier, Godou was still in the city center of Tokyo.

But now, he was in the deep mountains of Chichibu where autumn was in full swing. The location was also at quite a high altitude. With only regular street clothes, whether the wind or the night air itself, both felt rather chilly.

"Well, let's take Your Majesty to a nice place. There's a mountain hut not too far from here."

Ena immediately suggested.

"I know the old man who uses the place when he comes here for gathering mountain vegetables and hunting. Ena also keeps stuff like rice and miso there for emergency situations. So we can make dinner there."

"Dinner eh? That's a really great idea."

Although Godou already had dinner earlier, it was not enough to fill his stomach completely. Furthermore, a meal to warm up his cold body would be most gratifying. Godou's eyes began to shine brightly.

Thus the two of them started walking along a mountain path.

Before setting off, Ena wrote a letter using notebook paper and an oil-based marker she had brought. After folding the paper four times and throwing it into the air, the letter suddenly vanished. This was mailing magic for sending letters faraway. In this case, the destination was the Sayanomiya residence.

This was for reporting Godou and Ena's situation to Kaoru, Yuri , Liliana and the rest because cellphones had no reception in a mountain like this. However, this spell could not be used unless the receiver's location was known, which meant that Godou and Ena had no way of obtaining a reply...

At any rate, Godou and Ena fulfilled their minimum obligation to keep in touch.

Godou followed Ena along the mountain path which took them upstream of the river. Sometimes they had to push vegetation aside and other times they had to follow animal trails.

Naturally, there were no street lights or anything of that sort while they traveled at night like this.

When they walked in areas with a clear view of the sky, the moon and the stars offered illumination. The stars in the night canopy of the sky proved to be an unexpected bright source of light.

However, there was no such blessing when moving amidst dense foliage.

During these times, it felt like wandering in darkness with something sticky entangling one's body and Godou's only beacon was the view of Ena's back ahead of him. Even an experienced hiker would probably have difficulty advancing in these conditions.

On the other hand, Kusanagi Godou was a Campione.

In actual fact, given the "special constitution" of a godslayer, Godou possessed rather powerful night vision.

Well, it was still impossible for him to see clearly in complete darkness. But given "this level of darkness," there was no problem at all. Like a nocturnal beast, Godou followed closely behind Ena.

Speaking of which, there seemed to be someone who had called Campiones like Godou and others "god-slaying beasts"—

"Well, good night vision doesn't necessarily translate into hiking prowess..."

Godou muttered as he followed behind Ena.

Because she was the child of nature who treated mountain training as part of her everyday life, Ena walked rather quickly despite hiking at night. And to think she was also carrying a case containing her luggage—the "secret box" as it was known in the world of mountain training.

Godou had to summon his best effort to keep up or else he would soon be left behind.

That said, although his steps were not as quick and nimble, he did not pant or become out of breath. For someone who had always taken pride in his stamina, at least he succeeded in preserving his self-esteem. On the other hand, it was quite likely that Ena had intentionally controlled her pace to accommodate an "amateur" like him...

After walking a fair distance, they came to the side of a river again.

This place appeared to be upstream of their previous location. Godou suddenly had an idea.

"If we're going to make dinner, it'd be nice to catch some fish from this river."

"Yeah, but you won't have much luck fishing here. So it's best not to try."

"Really? The water looks so clear here, so I thought lots of fish would inhabit it."

Ena's nonchalant answer puzzled Godou.

The Hime-Miko of the Sword walking in front turned her head around, a grin displayed on her lips.

"There is a rapid current slightly downstream from here leading to a waterfall. The current is so fast that even fish find it difficult to swim in, which is why fish are rare in this area."

"Wow, this is really deep in the mountains."

The water flowing by should really be called the headwater or upper course rather than a river.

Feeling impressed, Godou nodded.

Although he was an athletic proponent of outdoor activities with plenty of camping and hiking experience, he had seldom stepped foot so deeply into the mountains. Without Ena as his guide, he would most probably run into trouble quickly.

At the same time, he was quite surprised by the [Wind]'s ability to transport him instantaneously this deep into the mountains.

But then again, this was the incarnation capable of transcending boundaries between reality and the Netherworld. Godou felt that so long as conditions were satisfied, he could even fly across to the other side of the globe.

Walking along this river, Godou and Ena soon arrived before a mountain hut.

It was a crude wooden dwelling built not too far from the river.

Were it in a city, an old and decrepit building like this would have been knocked down long ago. Not only was the entire house covered by a thin layer of dirt, it was also making creaking noises.

At least it still had a roof and despite the thin wooden boards used, it did have walls.

Given the current situation, it could be considered three-star accommodations. Following Ena who behaved as if she were returning to her own home, Godou entered with gratitude.

On their first encounter, Ena had brewed the same type of powdered tea she was serving now.

Last time, Ena's casual yet experienced looking manner of preparation resulted in very tasty tea. Currently, Ena was lighting up a fire on the hearth which was already smoked black from use.

A pot of water was freshly boiled over it.

"Although this isn't anything special and it's just crude tea literally... Please enjoy, Your Majesty."

Just as Godou expected, the crude tea Ena prepared casually turned out to be really tasty.

Despite the poorly preserved tea leaves in the hut and the use of an ordinary teapot one could find anywhere, the rich flavor made all these adverse conditions seem like a lie.

However, Godou went "Eh?" in puzzlement after drinking the tea.

Fishing rice grains out of a sack, Ena tossed them into the boiling water in the same manner as she had prepared the tea. She

was quite casual about it. Rather than standing in testament to her free and unfettered personality, this simply gave Godou an impression of appropriate casualness.

"Let me warn beforehand. Do not expect too much from the taste of Ena's cooking."

"But I find your tea tasty as always, Seishuuin."

"Well, see, the art of tea has been part of a general's knowledge ever since ancient times."

This daughter, hailing from a family that gave rise to generals in the Warring States Period, explained in a pretentiously knowing manner.

Her original personality aside, Ena had received an excellent Yamato Nadeshiko education as a descendant from the House of Seishuuin. Could it be possible that cooking was one area she did not excel in?

Intrigued, Godou brought up another subject.

"That three-eyed guy... Do you think he can be considered a god ?"

After the brief conflict just now, this was the question that had occupied Godou's mind as he hiked.

The handsome young man transformed from the three eyes—

Whether facing the set of eyes or the handsome young man, Godou's body and mind had filled with power for battle. This could be taken as proof of a god. However, the enemy's avoidance of a battle with Ena seemed a little contrary to the ways of [Heretic Gods]...

"Yes. It should be considered a god, probably. A god originating from the talisman of the Illustrious Sage, there is no mistake that he is the hero, True Lord Erlang, who defeated Sun Wukong."

Although delivered with a casual tone of voice, Ena still concurred with Godou's idea.

"Then some sort of circumstance is preventing him from going all out, but I've no idea what."

"You think so too, Seishuuin? Well, I don't think pondering about it any further would yield anything useful. Since Mariya isn't here, let's just put the matter aside for now."

No matter what sort of origins the enemy had, ultimately Godou still had to meet him in battle.

Deciding that, Godou and Ena nodded to each other.

For this pair whose instinctual and beast-like skills surpassed their intellect, agreement was easily reached in situations like this one.

If Erica was present, she would probably mock him sardonically , going 'Despite insisting your adherence to reason all the time, you always end up acting the same way, Godou...'

"If you feel concerned, why don't we try asking Grampsy?"

Ena suddenly suggested.

"The talisman of the Illustrious Sage... This thing came from Grampsy and company in the Netherworld. Some kind of divine talisman prepared somewhere and taken for the purpose of sealing the dragon and snake vanquishing hero, Sun Wukong."

"Susanoo and those guys huh... Well, forget about it then."

The ancient ones who acted as the History Compilation Committee's "council of elders." The one acting as chief was Susanoo—recalling the storm god who lived secluded in the Netherworld, Godou immediately responded.

"That guy's not gonna give us an honest answer."

"Yeah, Ena thinks so too, actually."

Ena nodded as if pleased with their agreement. She smiled for some reason.

"What's up, Seishuuin? You look so happy."

"Fufu. Because Your Majesty tends to share the same opinion as me most of the time, it's quite easy to imagine what you're

thinking. Other than Your Majesty, there are very few... No, there's no one else who has a mind that thinks like Ena."

"W-Why do I feel like I'm nowhere near as ridiculous as you, Seishuuin..."

"What are you talking about? Your Majesty is roughly a hundred times more ridiculous than Ena."

Whether as a miko or a Yamato Nadeshiko, Seishuuin Ena was a girl beyond the realm of normal.

Godou could not help but protest against such a comment coming from someone like her. That said, after scrutinizing his own behavior, Godou could only swallow the words he was almost about to spit out—

Could she have guessed what he was thinking? As if encouraging Godou, Ena patted him on the shoulder.

"Cheer up. It's alright. No matter how ridiculous a person you are, Your Majesty, we will always stay by your side. No need to mind Ena and the rest of us, just continue to charge forward!"

"On the other hand, I wish you girls could restrain me before I charge forward..."

"Then it won't be very interesting. Besides, no one can stop Your Majesty when you're charging forward."

After commenting on Godou's personality with full confidence, Ena changed the subject.

"By the way... Your Majesty has already decided to fight, right?"

"Well yeah. That Erlang whatever guy seems to have his sights set on me. And if he really is a [Heretic God], then I need to take him down before he raises a commotion. That's really the way it should be done."

"Then, umm... *That* is necessary after all, right?"

Godou stared blankly all of a sudden. What was *that* referring to ? Hence Ena whispered softly:

"The sword for slicing apart True Lord Erlang. It's a simple matter for you to obtain knowledge about what kind of god he is. All you need to do is ask, Your Majesty, and Ena will prepare immediately."

"Ehhh!?"

Asked by her so suddenly, Godou was rendered speechless. Then he also noticed.

Ena had started at some point to look up to him shyly as if observing his face for his intentions.

"B-Back in Nikkou when fighting side by side, Your Majesty has already recognized Ena as your woman, right?"

"R-R-R-Recognition is a bit premature to say. Besides, I'd curse and scold myself if I lived so irresponsibly as a despicable human being!"

"In any case, Ena is known publically as Your Majesty's woman. So it's fine..."

"Fine—!?"

"No matter how many times Your Majesty wishes to kiss... It's fine. Yes, Ena wants to kiss Your Majesty."

Hey hey. Isn't this behavior for instilling knowledge required for battling gods rather than for the sake of kissing?

Godou wanted to say this but could not bring himself to do so. As he thought, this was because mouth-to-mouth action was too shocking for him.

"Back then was when everyone was together... But Ena really wants to have a good and proper kiss with Your Majesty alone..."

Ena's lips trembled as she whispered softly. She was quite nervous.

The girl, unaccustomed to this behavior, was mustering her courage to 'plead' with him. In order to fight the god again, the trump card, the [Spell Words of the Sword], must be prepared beforehand after all.

These thoughts swirled into a vortex in Godou's mind as dozens of seconds passed. A brief moment of hesitation. But after overcoming these doubts, Godou finally made his decision.

Reaching out with his hand, he embraced Ena's body that was slender yet suitably voluptuous in all the right places.

"I'm relying on you. Please tell me about the god, True Lord Erlang."

"Ah..."

Godou used his lips to seal Ena's mouth just as she was about to whisper, stealing her lips.

Smooch. With the coming together of mucous membranes, the harmonious sounds roused Godou's inner passion to a blaze.

He separated from Ena's lips for an instant. The usually carefree girl displayed a sad expression, reluctant to part. Her eyes seemed to be pleading as she gazed at Godou, she did not speak.

She was feeling shy. This was an expression and attitude Godou could not imagine coming from the way Ena usually acted.

Finding her adorable, Godou once again drew near her lips.

Ena's face instantly brightened up. Pressing their lips together, they began to kiss again.

Godou sucked on the Ena's lips as she displayed a blissful expression, enjoying a fulfilling feeling of satisfaction.

"Your Majesty, let's have another go... Okay?"

Seductive words came from Ena's lips.

As Ena panted heavily, Godou kissed her even more forcefully, sucking on her lips.

On the other hand, Ena remained passive as if betraying her own request. All she did was yield and accommodate Godou.

She was completely different from Erica in this regard and unaccustomed to this behavior. She probably had little idea of what to do in this situation. Finding Ena inexorably adorable like this, Godou inserted his tongue into Ena's mouth and probed deep .

"Mmm... Ah!"

Surprised, Ena moaned. But unfazed, Godou began to explore her tongue inside Ena's mouth.

The two tongues entangled each other and came together intimately as one. Wetting each other's lips with their saliva, they gazed into each other's eyes.

After a long and thorough kiss, Godou moved his lips away again.

Ena's face was blushing red from ecstasy as she nodded at Godou, indicating it was about time to perform the "ritual." Godou covered her mouth with his lips to substitute for an answer.

"Th-The Illustrious Sage, True Lord Erlang is an ancient Chinese god. He is also known for his monster-slaying ability..."

Their lips pressed together, Ena seemed especially adorable as she murmured softly, accompanied by weak breaths.

"His prototype was once thought to be a general from the either the Qin or Sui dynasties. A man with great accomplishments in regulating floods. However, like the Great Sage Equaling Heaven, he ended up amalgamating historical facts with all sorts of folk stories to produce the current form of True Lord Erlang's legend..."

Their lips pressed together, spell words passed from one to the other, building a magical connection between the two of them.

Knowledge about True Lord Erlang the Illustrious Sage flowed into Godou's mind, the result of the spell words Ena had composed. Kissing repeatedly in this manner, the two transferred knowledge.

Not long after, Godou nodded greatly.

Knowledge about an enemy god was the requirement for using Verethragna's tenth incarnation, the [Warrior].

Once this knowledge was obtained, everything was ready. Godou confirmed that he was able to use this weapon. Filled with gratitude, Godou finally kissed Ena gently on the lips.

"Fufu. Ena is so happy to be able to help Your Majesty..."

After smiling adorably, Ena suddenly jumped in surprise.

She frantically separated herself from Godou's body. While engaged in their behavior, they had embraced each other, driven by their heightened emotions. Ena seemed to be suddenly embarrassed by her actions.

Avoiding Godou's gaze, Ena bowed her head, looking very shy. This sort of behavior made her usual boldness seem like a farfetched lie. Seeing her act so adorably, Godou decided he would feel bad if he extended her embarrassment any further. Hence he decided not to strike up conversation for now.

The pair remained silent for a brief while.

However, the silence was not awkward. Instead, there was a feeling as if their hearts were connected and they could communicate without words.

Godou spontaneously looked up and found his gaze meeting with Ena's. Feeling a little embarrassed, he peeked at Ena. Likewise, Ena peeked at Godou and they both smiled shyly at the same time.

Regaining their composure after a while, Ena looked at the pot on the hearth and said:

"Oh, looks like it's about done."

Thin porridge had been cooking over a slow fire during this time. Ena took out two little containers carrying salt and miso respectively.

Worrying about this Hime-Miko who was unskilled in cooking, Godou offered to help:

"If you don't mind, how about you let me do the rest?"

"It's okay, I want to test out the secret recipe I learned from an older man I'm acquainted with."

"Secret recipe? Sounds quite amazing."

"It's quite simple really. I remember him saying it when he was boiling something in a pot. No need to put too much stuff, just add enough miso to make the taste palatable. That's what he said roughly."

Using her usual unrefined manner, Ena scattered salt and miso into the thin porridge. After giving it a taste, she went "That's about right" and declared her task complete.

Pouring the thin porridge into their teacups, Godou and Ena began to eat.

In terms of results, it was quite a satisfying meal.

As the taste of miso spread throughout Godou's hungry stomach which had emptied as a result of physical exertion, the hot porridge warmed up his cold body.

However, the best seasoning was actually the opportunity to partake in this outdoor cooking with a kindred spirit like Ena here.

Several hours passed after the weapon was prepared and dinner was eaten—

Completely ready, Godou suddenly shuddered. Power coursed through his body and his emotions began to rise. These were battle preparations.

A Campione's body and mind would automatically enter battle readiness whenever a god approached.

As he gestured to Ena with his eyes, the Hime-Miko of the Sword nodded.

The two stood up and went outside the hut.

The approaching enemy should be the handsome god—the Illustrious Sage, True Lord Erlang.

"I knew it huh..."

Just as expected, a handsome young man was standing outside the hut, dressed glamorously. As Godou nodded at the sight, Ena instantly stepped forward from his side. She intended to participate in the battle.

"Your Majesty, Ama no Murakumo please."

Godou slowly opened his right palm and granted her the divine sword's usage rights.

This now allowed Ena to summoned the "partner" at any time. However, in contrast to the girl who readied herself for battle, True Lord Erlang spoke, using his whispering voice as usual.

(O child of mankind, untainted by evil, I have no intention of harming an innocent girl. Only evil monsters are my targets for slaying.)

It sounded like a voice carried by wind from afar.

Under normal conditions, they should be hearing a candid and manly voice, right?

Such was the impression given by True Lord Erlang(?)'s voice.

(Would you please stand down as a show of respect to the Illustrious Sage, True Lord Erlang...?)

"Impossible. As His Majesty's woman, Ena is responsible for managing his sword—this partner. I will protect His Majesty even at the cost of my life."

The jet-black divine sword suddenly manifested in Ena's hand as she made her bold declaration. The Hime-Miko's entire body proceeded to be filled with Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi's divine aura.

Using this technique of divine possession, Ena obtained combat power allowing her to fight divine beasts, existences one step below gods.

True Lord Erlang smiled tenderly in response.

(Excellent resolve. Disregarding your foolishness of serving the wrong master, my name of Yang Erlang shall be tainted if I should fail to commend you for your loyalty. In that case, I swear I shall defeat Kusanagi Godou without bringing you to any harm!)

He really acted so much like an "ally of justice" that one could almost see a halo behind him.

It was quite fitting for a god known for benevolence and evil slaying. Nevertheless, Godou was quite surprised. He recalled the [Heretic God], Verethragna, he had met in the very beginning.

Thinking back closely, that youth was also a protector god of justice.

However, wandering on earth, he was devoured by the maniacal nature of his heretic self, twisting his original divinity subtly, going as far as to make him a menace to the inhabitants of Sardinia.

In contrast, True Lord Erlang the Illustrious Sage displayed such dazzling splendor—

Incomprehensible. Godou cast his doubts aside for now. He currently had to fight this three-eyed god.

"The Illustrious Sage, True Lord Erlang, was born as the nephew of the emperor of the heavens, the highest god in the Daoist pantheon!"

Godou spoke spell words softly, taking on the [Warrior] incarnation.

In order to create the blade for slicing apart this benevolent god, he continued to utter spell words.

"In ancient times, the sister of the emperor of the heavens descended upon the earth and bore a child with a human. This child is True Lord Erlang. As a soldier, indeed he served his uncle in the celestial realm."

Spheres of light appeared one after another in Godou's surroundings.

"However, the majority of his stories take place in the mortal realm, including the subduing of Sun Wukong. Despite being a god, True Lord Erlang made his residence in China's *Guanzhou* prefecture. After receiving divine orders to defeat Sun Wukong who was causing mayhem in the lower realm, he stepped forward to subdue the monkey."

Within the blink of an eye, the spheres of light now numbered in the hundreds.

Like radiant stars in a galaxy, shining in the night sky, these were all blades for slicing True Lord Erlang apart and weapons that moved in accordance with Godou's thoughts.

Readying his deadly sword formation, Godou glared at his enemy sharply.

"A noble heavenly being who lingered in the mortal realm to fight and perform benevolent deeds. In other words, a legend of a wandering noble. Rather than a pure god of war, he was a archetypical protagonist from legends of wandering nobles—this is precisely True Lord Erlang's characteristic and the reason why the people revere and praise him!"

Responding to these spell words that carried the intent to attack , dozens of spheres of light flew towards True Lord Erlang.

On the other hand, the three-eyed, handsome young man smiled cheerfully despite being the target. He was quite composed.

(Hmph. To be honest, I already understand your sword quite well.)

These words, delivered with a smile, greatly surprised Godou.

(Indeed, the spell words for slicing through us gods is a troublesome weapon. But so long as one knows its operating principles, one could easily come up with quite a number of counters.)

"Counters!?"

As Godou watched in surprise, True Lord Erlang underwent a transformation.

The three-eyed handsome young man instantly took on the form of a monkey. Standing 160cm in height, wearing a yellow Beijing opera costume, wielding the Ruyi Staf—this appearance belonged precisely to the Great Sage Equaling Heaven, Sun Wukong!

(Behold, I am not the divine lord, the Illustrious Sage. My family name is Sun, given name is Wukong... The Great Sage Equaling Heaven hereby announces his entry!)

The flying spell words of the sword all struck Sun Wukong/ True Lord Erlang.

However, these spheres of light, which were normally supposed to slice through his divinity, only ended up bumping into Sun Wukong's body of flesh. They were unable to cause any damage at all!

"This is a spell of transformation, Your Majesty. Like Sun Wukong, True Lord Erlang is also a god skilled in transformation!"

"Using [Transformation] to become another god, thereby obtaining a body unaffected by the [Sword]!?"

The spell words for slicing True Lord Erlang could not cut the Great Sage Equaling Heaven.

Through Ena's warning and the [Warrior]'s eyes that could see through an enemy's traits, Godou discerned what his enemy had done.

Furthermore, he discovered another fact.

Apart from the [Warrior], none of Verethragna's incarnations were available.

Let alone the [Bull] or the [Raptor], even the trump card that was in certain ways more precious than the [Warrior]—the [White Stallion]—could not be used.

Godou frowned.

[Heretic Gods] and Campiones were existences reviled by the world for the most part.

Consequently, the [White Stallion] incarnation was able to take a decisive role in most of Godou's battles by exterminating the people's public enemy. However, in True Lord Erlang's case—

He had shown consideration by refraining from harming Liliana, Yuri, Ena and the others.

In other words, True Lord Erlang's actions embodied his existence as a "perfect god of benevolence" who "only vanquished evil." Hence, he could not possibly become the [White Stallion]'s target.

"None of my usual tactics work at all... So I guess the 'nemesis' Mariya mentioned is this guy huh."

Finding the enemy more difficult to handle than expected, Godou muttered.

But involuntarily, his lips twisted in a savage grin, forming a grotesque shape.

Fine by me. Even if I cannot use the spell words of the sword or the power of the sun, I'll still continue to fight. No matter what, I will seize victory in my hands. After all, that's exactly what I've been doing all along.

Fighting hopeless battles against enemies with no chance of winning—

Kusanagi Godou found himself gradually accustomed to this sort of challenging situation despite his best intentions!

(Fufufufu. What sharp eyes you have. As a Devil King who stands as the enemy of gods, this is more like it.)

True Lord Erlang whispered as if responding to Godou's fighting spirit.

Then Sun Wukong's body began to change. From a war god in the shape of a monkey, he instantly turned into a tall and muscular old man.

This was a person—no, god whom Godou recognized.

"Grampsy!?"

Ena cried out. After taking on Sun Wukong's appearance, True Lord Erlang transformed into Susanoo this time.

Part 4

Kusanagi Godou and the Illustrious Sage, True Lord Erlang, began their battle in front of a riverside hut.

This was a confrontation between the god-slaying sword wielded by the war god Verethragna against the transformation arts employed by the noble, evil-slaying god of China.

"Manifest justice in this world through these spell words of mine!"

Chanting the sacred warlord's incantation, Godou accelerated a portion of the [Sword].

Over a thousand spheres of light, shining brightly like stars in the night sky, surrounded Godou all around and overhead.

From among them, ten-odd spheres of light flew towards True Lord Erlang.

The three-eyed, handsome young man was supposed to be attacked by these spheres of light, but his current appearance was that of a muscular old man.

The enemy had taken the form of the hermit [Heretic God], Susanoo, with whom Godou was acquainted.

(Fufu. This skill is employed for the sake of countering your spell words of the sword. Savor it well.)

The flying [Swords] struck Susanoo/True Lord Erlang's body.

But Godou frowned. They simply struck without causing any damage.

The [Sword] turned out to be completely useless!

(These spell words are the blades for slicing True Lord Erlang the Illustrious Sage... In that case, were I to transform into another god, I should be able to withstand them more or less. It looks like my idea is correct.)

"Looks like it, but then again, there should be limits to transformations, right?"

He had transformed into completely unrelated divinities.

No matter how skilled in the spell of transformation, he could not possibly keep this up indefinitely. Godou began to focus his gaze and stared at the being who looked just like the old god Susanoo.

The [Warrior] incarnation, which controlled the sword of spell words, possessed the power to see through an enemy's true nature.

Currently, True Lord Erlang could be described as weaving Susanoo's divinity using the spell of transformation to cover himself like a layer of clothing.

In this manner, Verethragna's [Sword] could apparently be deceived for now—

Godou then discovered something. He could see a tiny crack in this layer of clothing where True Lord Erlang's original divinity was leaking out.

So long as it could be seen like this—the enemy can be vanquished!

"I am the strongest, holding all victory in my hands! All evil-doers, tremble before my strength."

Chanting spell words with certainty, Godou caused roughly ten spheres of light to accelerate. Then the spheres flew before Susanoo/True Lord Erlang one after another, and just before they penetrated that muscular body—

(Make haste! To manifest endless divine powers, a miracle shall appear!)

Susanoo's lips moved to release True Lord Erlang's whispers. The enemy was chanting spell words as well.

The storm god's appearance changed at this time, taking on a new form in seconds.

"Another guy I know!"

Godou yelled.

This time, True Lord Erlang had become a glaring old man dressed in a black coat.

An air of intellect combined with a pair of emerald-green eyes like a tiger's—the enemy from the past, Dejanstahl Voban.

Furthermore, the instant True Lord Erlang took on the guise of Devil King "Voban"—

Godou could no longer see the crack. After True Lord Erlang's original divinity was concealed beneath the newly transformed appearance, the crack was no longer visible.

As Godou watched in great surprise, the [Swords] struck Voban's body.

Once again, they struck their target without any effect. Apparently because Godou could no longer see the crack, the [Sword] was unable to slice True Lord Erlang's divinity inside.

This countermeasure stonewalled the [Sword]'s spell words...!

Godou glared sharply in defiance to the enemy's little trick. In response, a refreshing smile appeared on Voban's face. A rather dissonant sight. Indeed, the elderly man could not possibly smile so cheerfully.

This stood as evidence that True Lord Erlang was actually inside.

Since that was the case, Godou focused his eyes and stared again, in order to find a similar imperfection in the transformation spell.

However, before he could succeed, True Lord Erlang took action.

(Make haste!)

Accompanied by brief spell words, he transformed again.

This time, he did not take on the appearance of a Campione but a deity instead.

Godou jumped in surprise. It was a nostalgic silver-haired pubescent girl. Although she was wearing modern clothing, she gave off a conqueror's aura like a queen. This was the serpent goddess of darkness whom Godou had fought in the past.

True Lord Erlang transformed into Heretic Athena, and at the same time—

(Light that reveals evil, manifest thus. Enact miracles to vanquish evil and uphold justice, burn the heretics and weaken all evil!)

A vertical opening appeared on young Athena's forehead to reveal a third eye. This eye suddenly shone brightly.

Instantly, Godou felt magical power flowing out of his body.

"Guh—!"

The third eye seemed to manifest the miracle of stealing a Campione's power.

Godou recalled what happened during dusk.

When facing off against True Lord Erlang for the first time, he was also drained of magical power in the same way.

Seeing as that was the case, Godou instantly raised the magical power in his body in order to resist the miracle enacted by the [Eye]. A Campione's body already possessed extremely potent resistance against magic and authorities. So long as Godou was not

caught off guard, he could prevent his magical power from being completely drained. Nevertheless, he still clicked his tongue.

Godou could still feel the magical power in his body siphoned off slowly.

As expected of his "nemesis." Godou could not defend completely. Accompanying the loss of magical power, the [Sword]' s shining spheres of light disappeared one by one from Godou's surroundings.

Then the enemy's counterattack came.

(Fufufu, now is about time for me to begin taking the offensive.)

Three-eyed Athena murmured as she approached.

With lightning speed, Athena/True Lord Erlang jumped in front of Godou. A three-pronged bladed polearm manifested in the goddess' right hand.

This was True Lord Erlang's double-edged trident—using this weapon, the enemy made a thrust towards Godou's heart!

A sure-kill thrust was arriving with frightening speed.

Just in the nick of time, Godou jumped left and managed to evade the attack.

Campiones were blessed with exceptional concentration during combat. Thanks to that, Godou was able scurry around with beast-like reflexes.

"It feels like this guy should be able to fight equally with that idiot Doni..."

Faced with his opponent's overwhelming offensive, Godou groaned.

Salvatore Doni was a genius swordsman for whom titles such as Sword Demon or Sword God would not be excessive. At the same time, he was also a Campione. Godou recognized that True Lord Erlang's martial prowess were on the same level as that man.

Attempting to use the [Raptor] incarnation's divine speed to fight—would be a poor decision indeed.

Masters on this level should be able to see through divine speed , rendering it meaningless.

(Since I have grown accustomed to this body, my movements will not be as clumsy as earlier. Come, fight me fair and square!)

"If you want to fight fair and square, then I hope you'd stop using those absurd transformations!"

True Lord Erlang smiled and ignored Godou's retort, transforming once again.

This time he turned into Athena's adolescent form, instantly growing taller and lengthening the arms and legs. The clothes also changed into modest, ancient attire—the original appearance Athena had recovered.

Seeing this, Godou attempted to search for a flaw in the transformation again.

But just as he was about to do that, True Lord Erlang suddenly threw away the double-edged trident in his hand. At the same time, the ambush took place.

Ena slashed towards True Lord Erlang who was in Athena's form.

In order to avoid getting in the way of Godou's manipulation of the [Sword], the Hime-Miko of the Sword had kept her distance from the battlefield, lying in wait for a chance to make a surprise attack with the jet-black divine blade, Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi.

"Yaaaaaaaaaaah!"

Ena swung the divine sword overhead using the *hassou-no-kamae* stance.[11] This was a strike using the body's full power.

Most likely eschewing all defense, this was a deadly blow focused entirely on taking out the enemy. Furthermore, Ena was already in the state of divine possession, having summoned Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi's divine aura into her body.

Nevertheless, Athena/True Lord Erlang calmly evaded the slash with a light twist of the body.

Not only that, he even swung his right hand like a whip in a flash during the instant Ena moved past him. Effortlessly, he pushed the Hime-Miko away with the back of his hand.

(O maiden, such ferocious vigor you have!)

"Guh—!"

"Are you okay, Seishuuin!?"

Seeing his companion sent flying by the god's blow and fallen on the ground, Godou called out.

Ena swiftly got up before she answered and prepared the divine sword in a stance once more. Her quick movements and imposing demeanor indicated that she was not injured.

"No harm done at all, Your Majesty. Completely okay."

Ena reported her safety completely nonchalantly.

"Didn't the god, True Lord Erlang, mention just now? He will obtain victory without harming Ena whatsoever. So there shouldn't be any danger."

"We can't possibly believe that guy completely. He could easily go back on a verbal agreement."

"True. But then again, Ena feels like this god won't go back on his word. How should one put it? Basically he absolutely won't do anything immoral like that..."

Ena disagreed with Godou's warning.

Godou was mildly surprised, although he did secretly harbor the same impression Ena got from the god.

Even if the fundamental nature of the divinity was benevolent, wandering on earth as a heretic caused distortions at the same time , finally resulting in a god of misfortune bringing calamity and disaster. This was what [Heretic Gods] were supposed to be.

(Ho. There is no need to be concerned with trivial details of that sort.)

Keeping the third eye open, Athena/True Lord Erlang smiled.

(Your considerations are correct. I, Erlang, am not one of those who shamelessly renege on their own promises. How about I swear an oath not to harm you the slightest?)

Immediately after declaring thus, True Lord Erlang manifested a new weapon in his hand.

First there was the bow in his left hand. Then there was the fist-sized ball of iron in his right. The evil-slaying and righteous warrior god placed the iron ball onto the bowstring and drew the bow to its limit.

The iron ball was shot like an arrow—This was the ancient Chinese long range weapon known as the peddle bow.

Twang! As the bowstring sounded, the iron ball flew out. The target was Kusanagi Godou, naturally. Furthermore, the iron ball released crackling blue-white lightning as it flew!

Just as Godou and Ena readied their stances to receive the incoming attack—

"Eli Eli lama sabachthani? Oh Lord, why hast thou forsaken me!?"

Godou and Ena both heard familiar spell words.

"O my God, I cry in the day time, but thou hearest not; and in the night season, and am not silent—"[12]

These were the Golgotha spell words, the trump card of the girl known as the [Diavolo Rosso].

Just as expected, Erica leaped from the shadows amidst the trees, wrapped in her usual red and black cape, carrying the lion's magic sword, Cuore di Leone.

"But thou art holy, O thou that inhabitest the praises of Israel!"[13]

The magic sword was currently infused with the spell words of resentment and despair.

An ordinary human would probably die instantly upon close contact with the sword. Using Cuore di Leone which had been

imbued with this power, Erica struck down the electrified iron ball head on.

Lightning scattered noisily as the two halves of the iron ball rolled about on the ground.

The latecomer turned her head back to reveal a cheerful smile, her face as glamorous as always.

"I seem to have kept you two waiting, Godou and Ena-san."

"You don't seem very flustered, on the other hand."

Godou calmly replied to the "partner" who had finally arrived.

Although this battle was playing out completely differently from past conflicts, Godou found himself surprisingly calm and composed—

Simply the fact of Erica's arrival gave him such a feeling.

"Because I have appointments with other people sometimes. It's hard to be in both places at once. But no matter, it's not like one could bring a million reinforcements."

Erica asserted fearlessly, reminiscent of a lioness.

"Just as you already know, I, Erica Blandelli alone, am more valuable than a million reinforcements. Godou, I shall prove my worth and compensate my tardy arrival at the same time!"

Even though she was already late, Erica easily took the spotlight as the protagonist in the scene.

This manner of entering the stage made full use of Erica's natural talents.

In response to Erica's appearance, the warrior god transformed from Athena back to his original form.

This was True Lord Erlang the Illustrious Sage's reappearance as the tall and handsome young man as well as the three-eyed warrior.

(Kusanagi Godou's direct vassals have gathered. In that case, I have no choice but to show my true appearance once more.)

"Gathered?"

"Yes. I cannot possibly let Erica steal ahead and take all the credit!"

Answering in a stern tone, this was Liliana's voice which Godou had not heard for the last few hours.

Wielding the bow of Jonathan in her hand, she walked to Godou's side.

Godou went "I see" and nodded. The girls must have rushed over from Tokyo to Chichibu after receiving the letter Godou and Ena had sent several hours earlier.

After arriving near this mountain, they used magic to search for Godou's location, then flew here using Liliana's flight magic—

If that was how things transpired, it would only be natural for another girl to be present. Just as expected, Yuri also came running , dressed in her miko outfit.

"Godou-san, I have important news regarding True Lord Erlang ..."

Yuri reported as soon as she arrived by Godou's side.

"About the noble one... The real identity of the True Lord!"

Godou was shocked by her words. He immediately swept his gaze towards the rest of his companions. Erica, Liliana and Ena all nodded in response, implying they will hold the god off for a while.

"Yaaaaaaaaaah!"

Ena rushed headlong with Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi, charging at True Lord Erlang. She unleashed a blazing slash.

The True Lord swiftly evaded the attack. Aiming at this opportunity, Erica used Cuore di Leone to make a thrusting attack. Thrice in a row.

Although True Lord Erlang evaded the three thrusts successively, he was thrown off balance slightly.

Erica instantly leaped to the right, creating an opening for Liliana to fire her arrows.

The arrows of blue-white light shot by the bow of Jonathan were also infused with the spell words of David!

(Fufufufu. These maidens are quite a handful to handle!)

With extreme alacrity, True Lord Erlang swung his right hand, striking down the arrow of light with a karate chop.

Indeed, these were literally divine skills that only a warrior god could possess.

Next, Ena used Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi again to perform an overhead cut. It was a jumping slash that used the entire body's strength.

True Lord Erlang caught the divine sword with both hands in a display of the secret arts of unarmed counters against bladed weaponry.

Ena, Erica and Liliana carried out their own attacks in continuous succession.

Meanwhile, True Lord Erlang exhibited all sorts of divine skills, evading, deflecting and blocking the trio's attacks completely.

However, Erica and the girls were not so pressed as to be driven back, due to the fact that the True Lord only engaged in defense. Thus, the girls succeeded in buying time for Godou.

During this time, Godou listened to what Yuri had to say.

"You saw what kind of god he is?"

"Yes. The True Lord Erlang manifesting here is not a [Heretic God]. Instead, he could be said to be... A [True God]."

Hearing Yuri's oracle, Godou was rendered dumbfounded. A true god? Did that refer to a particular god?

"Godou-san, you already know that the Netherworld is the place known as the Boundary of Life and Immortality. The Domain of Life refers to the mortal world here. The Domain of Immortality is the world where gods originally reside."

Yuri explained the structure of the world in a quick tone of voice.

"[Heretic Gods] do not exist in the Domain of Immortality. When gods arrive in the mortal world by some chance occurrence, they are twisted and become [Heretic Gods] who deviate from their original existence. The god manifesting here is the True Lord Erlang who only exists in the Domain of Immortality... So this should be an clone."

"You said clone? A clone of the actual Erlang?"

"Yes. It feels like the True Lord is transmitting his divine power from the Domain of Immortality, thereby taking action with this clone. That is the feeling I am getting."

"Come to think of it, that guy did mention something about a ' crude body.'"

Godou did not think Yuri's speculation was off. He nodded.

I see. So that was why he made a perfect display of how a evil-slaying warrior god of benevolence should act.

"In that case, then the [White Stallion] definitely could not target him."

The unfortunate gut feeling he was having was now confirmed. Godou sighed. To be honest, he was banking his hope on the [White Stallion] a little.

Godou had wondered if the handsome god would expose his nature as a [Heretic God] sooner or later.

In that case, the battle against him became even simpler.

"So Godou-san's 'nemesis' that I sensed last time, really turns out to be..."

"Looks like it's this guy. And indeed he's tough to handle, most truly."

"Umm, Godou-san? Despite saying that, your face looks rather calm."

"Hmm, yeah. It's basically thanks to you, Mariya, I am now able to steel my resolve."

Godou smiled wryly in response to the incredulous Hime-Miko's query.

"Or rather, you've helped me muster my determination to test out a drastic measure I wanted to avoid as much as possible. Otherwise, I really wouldn't have wanted to do this."

"But even if I tried, I cannot stop you, right?"

This time it was Yuri's turn to sigh while Godou scratched his head.

"Since it has come to this, I can only say this to you: Please take care...!"

"Yeah. I will try my best to return alive. So that's that!"

Yuri's words were analogous to a virtuous wife bidding farewell to a terrible husband who was setting off for a reckless duel.

Feeling gratitude for the gentleness in Yuri's gaze, Godou rushed towards the god and the rest of his companions.

This was in front of the hut where he and Ena had stayed, the riverside where he had passed by when hiking earlier in the night.

The trio of Erica, Ena and Liliana currently had True Lord Erlang surrounded.

Ultimately, they were able to persevere till now only because the enemy did nothing but defend.

While evading the girls' magic sword, divine sword and arrows of light, the True Lord finally attacked.

First he shouted "Hah!" to immobilize Liliana. Then he poked Ena in the back with his middle finger, sending the Hime-Miko of the Sword collapsing on her knees.

Finally, he swung his arm like a whip and struck Erica with the back of his hand.

Although the blonde beauty already used Cuore di Leone to block, she still could not withstand the impact and was sent flying faraway.

Godou's arrival coincided with where she was flying, so he immediately caught her.

"Are you okay, Erica?"

"Yes, I guess. What about you, are you ready?"

Held in his arms, Erica did not have any injuries. Indeed, the enemy was truly a warrior god of benevolence. True Lord Erlang's earlier oath applied to people apart from Ena and he intended to adhere to it to the very end.

"Yes. I will decide the match next so there's something I need your help for."

True Lord Erlang displayed a light smile as he stared straight at Godou.

His companions could no longer pin him down so Godou explained concisely.

"What I'm about to do will be quite risky so I'm relying on you. If it succeeds, my life will be saved, so do your best."

"What completely vague orders. But you can thank me, Erica Blandelli, right now."

The smile surfacing on Erica's face displayed a lioness' ferocity and a queen's glory.

"I will show you that I am the woman who will surely meet your expectations!"

"Yeah, I'm relying on you."

Ending the brief planning session, Godou sprinted towards True Lord Erlang.

Now it was time to decide the match one on one. True Lord Erlang smiled at the arrival of the final phase.

(Fufu. You have already discovered my true nature.)

"This is only your clone. Your real self must be hidden somewhere, right?"

(Hiding myself is truly regrettable. A true god has no way of traveling to the mortal world. Or rather, the instant one leaves, one becomes heretical...)

True Lord Erlang's clone murmured in the same sort of incredible whispers he used previously.

This voice was likely transmitted all the way from the Domain of Immortality.

(Having taken an interest in you who has involved yourself with an old acquaintance of mine, I was thinking of testing you a little. Coincidentally, those miko happened to be randomly messing with my talisman.)

"Give me a break. If that's the case, could you not involve anyone apart from me!?"

Saying that, Godou turned his attention to the sky.

There were still a few dozen [Swords] hovering high above.

"Go!"

A brief spell word caused all the [Swords] to begin moving all at once.

They were aimed at True Lord Erlang, naturally. One after another, the spheres of light struck their target. However, it was still ineffective because the True Lord had taken on Athena's appearance again.

While withstanding the attacks of the [Sword]'s spell words, True Lord Erlang smiled using Athena's face.

(Kusanagi Godou. You cannot defeat me in this manner...)

"Of course I know that. So... please, Seishuuin!"

Godou made his request to the kneeling Hime-Miko. Ena instantly understood his intentions.

"Yes. Ama no Murakumo, return to His Majesty!"

The jet-black divine sword disappeared from Ena and manifested in Godou's hand instead.

The self-styled "partner" of the god-slayer, the god in the form of a sword. Godou gripped the Japanese sword's hilt tightly as he glared at Athena/True Lord Erlang.

Finally free of the [Sword]'s wave of attacks, the benevolent warrior god drew his peddle bow and fired!

The iron ball was shot. Judging from its trajectory, it was aimed at Kusanagi Godou's forehead. The iron ball sliced through wind as it traveled but Godou evaded calmly.

Just as the iron ball was about to strike Godou on the forehead, he used the [Raptor] incarnation.

This was the incarnation that could only be used in response to a high speed attack. While using this incarnation of divine speed, Godou obtained a light and agile body as well as overwhelming acceleration while everything else slowed down—

The iron ball slicing through the wind slowed down all at once, allowing Godou to dodge with ease.

However, the use of this incarnation caused severe heart pain to Godou afterwards and also immobilized his body not long after that.

(Fufu. Do you really believe you can defeat me in the limited time you have remaining?)

Seeing a time limit in Godou's course of action, True Lord Erlang smiled.

At the same time, he transformed from Athena back to the original handsome young man. He must have concluded that there was no need to transform once Godou no longer had the [Sword].

Just as he pointed out, there was little time remaining.

Hence, Godou had to decide the match in one fell swoop.

Wielding Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi arbitrarily, Godou pointed the blade at True Lord Erlang and made a straight thrust. Using the [Raptor]'s divine speed, he attacked in a straight line!

(Hmph, no matter what kind of divine speed, fast as lightning, I can still see through it!)

Boldly asserting, True Lord Erlang swung his right fist in response.

A martial arts move capable of countering divine speed. This was a secret art that both Salvatore Doni and Her Eminence Luo Hao had exhibited in the past. Nevertheless, because of Erlang's " crude body" as Godou expected—

True Lord Erlang's fist failed to strike down Godou. Instead, it resulted in mutual injuries.

Godou pierced the flank of True Lord Erlang's abdomen using Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi.

True Lord Erlang's hook punch landed on Godou's left ribs.

"Guha!"

Suffering the horrifying attack, Godou felt intense pain.

It felt like being struck by lightning. Although the punch landed in the region of his ribs, the terrifying impact coursed through his entire body. But at least he survived.

On the other hand, Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi was embedded deeply in True Lord Erlang's flank. Although the divine sword was buried to the hilt, there was not a single drop of bleeding.

(Hmm... This is getting challenging.)

True Lord Erlang's calm and composed whispers could be heard. As expected, this was not his true body.

Godou grinned savagely in response. Now he could put "that plan" into action...

Forcing his aching body to move, Godou kicked the ground and jumped.

(Hmm—!?)

Taking the skewered True Lord Erlang along with him, Godou took a leap.

The [Raptor] incarnation granted more than simply mobility of divine speed. Jumping ability and lightness of the body were also greatly augmented. Owing to this ability, Godou jumped into the river with divine speed.

The surface water current was quite rapid, with uneven rocks protruding. Since this was quite far up the mountain near the river's source, the water was not very deep, only reaching up to roughly knee or waist level at most.

Landing on a rock in the middle of the river, Godou jumped again.

Following the river, Godou aimed for some place higher, farther away.

(What are you planning, Kusanagi Godou!?)

Thanks to the giant leaps granted by the [Raptor], Godou obtained an overhead view of the headwater's flow. About thirty

meters away from the hut where Godou and Ena had rested, there was a fast flowing waterfall.

Although the river was quite narrow at that point and lacked the magnificence of a great waterfall, the height of the fall was quite substantial. Probably a fall of forty or fifty meters roughly.

This was the type of waterfall that fishes could hardly swim through. Godou nodded for it was exactly as Ena described.

'There is a rapid current slightly downstream from here leading to a waterfall. The current is so fast that even fish find it difficult to swim in, which is why fish are rare in this area.'

Making his jumps as high and far as he could, Godou finally reached the air above the waterfall—

At last, Godou used his trump card, the one he really wanted to avoid using.

"For victory, hasten forth before me..."

As the leap reached its peak, Godou chanted spell words as freefall began.

From the air, Godou could hear the rumbling of the waterfall beneath.

"O immortal sun, I beseech thee to grant radiance to the stallion. O stallion that moveth godlike with wondrous grace, bringest forth the halo of thy master—!"

Only targeting great sinners who had brought suffering to the people, this was the [White Stallion] incarnation.

And this time, the target was—Kusanagi Godou himself.

(Fuhahahaha! You wish to defeat me even at the cost of sacrificing yourself?)

Despite the time being night, the rays of dawn appeared in the eastern sky.

Bathed in the rosy glow together with Godou, True Lord Erlang , currently skewered by Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi, was unbelievably laughing with delight.

(T-To think you had the self-awareness of the great sinner you are!)

"S-Screw that! That's why I didn't want to use this method!"

(But then again, this means mutually assured destruction together with me?)

True Lord Erlang spoke as he motioned towards the faraway bottom of the waterfall they were freefalling towards.

He's not planning to resist? That's quite honest of him. In this very instant, a chain carrying an anchor came flying from the ground and wrapped itself multiple times around Godou's right foot.

True Lord Erlang whispered (Hmm!?) and stared dumbfounded . Godou breathed a sigh of relief.

"That girl Erica managed it after all..."

The instant he murmured, the chain clattered as it began to tug Godou's body.

This chain was created from Erica's iron alchemy. Launched into the air from the ground, it began to drag Godou.

Then the sun's shining light came flying from the eastern sky. Godou began to meditate silently: Reduce the scale of destruction as much as possible. Reduce, reduce... He kept reciting in his mind.

If the [White Stallion] was used without restraint, the tragic incineration of Palermo's harbor would be repeated.

But if he reduced the power as much as possible, he could limit destruction to roughly the size of two or three yachts. As for the greatest scale of destruction, Godou had no idea but the thought of testing it out never occurred to him...

Due to reducing the power halfway, the size of the shining beam of light shrunk all at once.

One resulting advantage was that the flames rushing through the sky missed the original target whose position had deviated—Kusanagi Godou who was being dragged by the chain.

In this manner, only True Lord Erlang was engulfed by the light and heat.

(Fufufu. What a fulfilling night, Kusanagi Godou. Should ill fate bring our paths to cross again, a rematch with no holds barred would be nice. Let us meet again!)

Godou barely managed to hear the handsome warrior god's parting words.

Perhaps he exhausted his good fortune in the scene just now. After saving Godou from his crisis, the chain loosened and lost grip of him. Godou fell straight down towards the waterfall beneath. Or rather than fall, he was crashing down.

The only saving grace was that the waterfall directly beneath would break his fall. Several seconds later, Godou crashed and sank into the water while experiencing a terrifying impact.

Furthermore, his heart was suffering maximum pain and his body was getting stiff with paralysis. These were all side effects after using the [Raptor].

Am I going to die this time? Godou was struck with the fear of death. Oh well, ever since becoming a Campione, he had already endured such terrifying experiences repeatedly, numbering in the teens.

One could say that terrifying experiences were customary now.

Even so—Godou began to ponder with deep feeling. He really wished for occasional opponents he could defeat easily with the [Ten Incarnations]. Facing opponents of that sort, he would not need to bear so much hardship every single time...

As he prayed for this wish from the bottom of his heart, Godou faced death once again.

"Are you okay, Kusanagi Godou!?"

Then someone extended a helping hand.

The god-slayer was saved by the selfless efforts of a friend, naturally, rather than a goddess of salvation.

Jumping swiftly into the waterfall, Liliana pulled Godou out from the water. Naturally, the silver-haired knight with flight capability would act the fastest in situations like this one.

Supported by Liliana on the bank at the bottom of the waterfall, Godou managed to sit up.

Very soon, he would enter the state of complete immobilization which would definitely result in drowning. Despite his embarrassing state, Godou desperately tried to speak.

"A-At least I survived... Thank you for saving me. But..."

Due to swallowing many mouthfuls of river water as well as the usual paralysis, Godou could not speak very well.

Nevertheless, he still forced himself to express gratitude to Liliana. He added:

"I-It's common for people trying to save the drowning to get into accidents themselves... Be more careful..."

"No need to worry. Do remember that I am a witch, so I more or less know several spells for preventing drowning. Witches are not only able to fly in the sky but also skilled in swimming in the water."

Influenced by Liliana's giggling smile, Godou smiled in return. Come to think of a it, a mermaid swimming freely in the water would be quite an elegant sight.

Realizing he was saved as a result of this, Godou nodded gratefully to Liliana—Then he noticed something at this moment and frantically turned his gaze away.

To his great surprise, Liliana was dressed only in underwear. Her slender figure was clad only in a two-piece set of violet lingerie.

"M-My apologies. I was thinking it would be easier to save you in this manner, so I swiftly undressed before entering the water..."

"I-Idiot... I should be the one saying sorry about this. You shouldn't need to apologize."

Liliana used her arms to cover up her chest in embarrassment.

On the other hand, Godou's body had started to become rigid, preventing him from shifting his line of sight.

Consequently, the silver-haired knight desperately shrank into a ball, trying to avert his gaze.

But then she suddenly jumped in surprise and leaned close to Godou's face instead.

"U-Umm. I have a suggestion..."

Clearly it was just a simple question, but her voice sounded inexplicably seductive.

Her usual, stern demeanor was gone as if it never existed. Godou gulped in response.

"Kusanagi Godou. Your body seems to be in poor condition. I believe that healing magic needs to be administered."

"Eh...!?"

"Th-This is simply an act of healing. So you must accept it no matter what!"

"B-But even if you say that so suddenly..."

As much as Godou wanted to stop her, Liliana slowly pressed her lips close.

She intended to apply magic through mouth to mouth. As much as Godou wished to evade, his body could not move. Furthermore, he found himself attracted to Liliana's beautiful face and the moist-looking eyes gazing at him—

Just as he was about to accept the silver-haired knight's request—

"Wait a minute, Lily. Since everyone is here, you can't be stealing credit for yourself, right?"

"S-Stealing credit is something that never crossed my mind. I am simply worried about the state of my lord's health."

Erica expressed her objections with ladylike elegance. Although slightly panicking, Liliana still retorted in a stern and knightly tone of voice. At some point in time, everyone had arrived to this downstream location.

Erica, Ena had arrived. Even Yuri, who had contributed greatly, was approaching as she panted heavily.

"Besides, I believe that Seishuuin Ena is the first person to steal a march."

Glancing at Ena's carefree face, Liliana stated.

"Kusanagi Godou must have obtained knowledge about True Lord Erlang at some point in time. The one who took on the role of instruction could be no one else but you."

"Yes. So that doesn't count as stealing a march."

Ena happily ignored the female knight's accusations.

"If someone else apart from Ena were present, then Ena wouldn't need to do it."

"However..."

"E-Excuse me, everyone. Let us first put this matter aside for now. Do remember that Godou-san fell from such a great height and was even drowning, okay!?"

Yuri interjected with a slightly angry tone of voice.

"Our first priority is to take care of Godou-san before—"

"You have a point, but there's really no need to be too concerned with priority at times like these, right?"

Erica smiled calmly in response.

"This person—Kusanagi Godou—is quite absurd in all sorts of ways, but above all is his ridiculous aspect of being 'unkillable.' "

"That does sound about right, but Erica-san!"

Godou was greatly pleased by Yuri's care towards him in furiously trying to convince the rest of the girls.

Oh well, as part of the common sense faction, Yuri would only accidentally say something like 'that does sound about right' because she was caught up in the mood of the situation.

In any case, Godou felt extremely cold in his completely drenched state, unable to move his arms at all.

Whether the dispute between the four girls, fights against strange gods, or even near death experiences like this, all of it could be considered a frequent occurrence in his life. Nothing particularly shocking.

Godou took a deep breath, feeling inexplicably happy about the girls' argument.

Meanwhile, in a corner of the Netherworld—

Two noble ones were standing face to face in a deep mountain hut while a storm raged outside. One was the elderly god known as Susanoo, the former [Heretic God] Haya Susanoo no Mikoto.

He was the storm god with intimate ties to Japanese imperial authority as well as the proper owner of Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi.

"So, True Lord, what's your take on the brat?"

"A reckless and immature fellow. However, combined with the unruly willpower he displayed in the end, it is certainly fitting for a god-slayer. Speaking of which—"

The one answering Susanoo's question was the handsome warrior god, the Illustrious Sage, True Lord Erlang.

"The heavenly child who slumbers... To me it is difficult to determine if he is truly capable of defeating the god-slaying Devil Kings."

True Lord Erlang possessed the countenance of the [Noble Wandering Hero]. This was also an aspect belonging to the heroic god nicknamed the "King of the End."

"Are you filled with anticipation for something you sensed?"

"Hahaha. I believe that unruly fellow's exploits should not stop with battling the Great Sage Equaling Heaven. Should an opportunity arise in the future, I will exterminate him for good."

True Lord Erlang laughed lightly and told Susanoo:

"In that case, I cannot idle here any longer."

"Hoho. My apologies for troubling you in various ways."

Almost simultaneously, True Lord Erlang disappeared from the thatched hut.

The real True Lord Erlang could only exist in the [Domain of Immortality].

This time, only a small portion of his divine spirit had descended upon the earth due to being summoned by the talisman of the Illustrious Sage.

Furthermore, this Netherworld was the homeward path leading to the Domain of Immortality.

Along the way back, True Lord Erlang had a chat with Susanoo at the latter's invitation.

Watching the True Lord vanish, Susanoo smiled with joy and refilled his wine cup.

Chapter 7 - The Stirring of Heroes

Part 1

Who could have expected a time traveling journey that would leave them stranded for almost two months?

After experiencing a great commotion in ancient Gaul, Kusanagi Godou and his companions finally returned to the modern era.

The "corridor" leading to the past era was located in the Casentino area on the east end of Italy's central region of Tuscany. This was a zone of lush vegetation, designated as a national park.

The time tunnel's entrance was situated in a flourishing forest in a corner of this region.

Upon returning to the modern era, the sun happened to be rising in the eastern sky. The forest was thickly covered with accumulated snow. The snow's pure whiteness was even brighter and more vivid than the trees' greenery.

The sunlight of dawn illuminated this part of the world with a rosy shade of color—

After admiring this landscape of fantasy from afar, the group started to make their way towards human settlement.

The group consisted of Kusanagi Godou, Salvatore Doni, Madame Aisha, Erica Blandelli, Mariya Yuri, Liliana Kranjcar and Seishuuin Ena.

"The world on this side really is more convenient after all."

After a brief break at the hotel, Godou was muttering to himself.

Before going on the journey to the past, Doni had gathered the knights of Italy at this ancient castle hotel.

The interiors, fitted with heating, were quite warm whereas hot running water came readily from taps. Showering facilities as well. Not only was there coffee to drink, but also pizza to eat.

The hotel had been converted from an ancient castle dating back to the Middle Ages. In contrast to its antique appearance, the hotel was filled with a sense of comfort.

"Yeah, it feels like I've finally come home."

After a refreshing shower, Doni was sitting in the hotel's bar, taking large swigs of beer and ravenously wolfing down three slices of pizza.

On the other hand, Godou was hoping to return to his home country as quickly as possible to have some Japanese food.

But due to various reasons, he had decided to stay at this hotel for now.

"Sorry, Godou-san, for my sake, you have to deliberately..."

"That's not something you need to apologize for. Besides, there's plenty of time since we're still in the middle of the post-exam break. Mariya, you should get some proper rest."

That was what Godou had said to Yuri who had suddenly fallen ill with a fever after returning from the past.

The fever's cause was probably not due to a flu but from the fatigue accumulated during the long journey. Furthermore, Yuri's state of health was already unstable before setting off from Japan. She would feel exhausted and dizzy in crowded places—Those were the symptoms presented by her current physiological state. It would be best to take more care.

There were other reasons for Godou's return to be delayed.

"Fufufufu. Somehow, I find myself quite happy to be in the modern era too!"

This woman, smiling innocently, was also part of the reason.

Namely, Madame Aisha who was currently smiling radiantly, sitting on the sofa in the hotel lobby.

Finally removing her ancient attire, she had changed into a navy-blue knitted ensemble with a long white skirt.

Dressed in this manner, the Madame was flanked by a scowling woman and a young man with a cautious expression, both sitting beside her.

The ponytailed female Paladino was Saint Raffaello and Doni's master. The other was Paolo Blandelli, Erica's paternal uncle.

"Good grief, how could you say that so casually? You've no idea how much trouble we had to go through."

"Madame, while making your stay in the local area, please do not hesitate to inform me or my association, the [Copper Black Cross], should you have any requests. I, Paolo Blandelli, intend to serve provisionally as your knight to fulfill your every bidding."

"My! Erica-san's uncle is truly quite the gentleman!"

The Madame was quite touched by Paolo's respectful offer.

However, rather than a show of chivalry, this should be considered a ploy to stay by a dangerous character's side for monitoring purposes.

In fact, the same idea had occurred to Godou after sensing the Madame's intention to take up accommodations at this hotel.

(I should stay here for now to monitor her.)

Et cetera. At least while the post-exam break lasted.

Before setting off from Japan, Godou and the other students had sat the third term's examinations at Jounan Academy where they were studying. After that, they had used the post-exam break to make the long trip from Japan to Italy.

Meanwhile, at a hidden position out of Madame Aisha's sight, several people were having a secret conversation.

"Will the people in this hotel be fine? Is there not quite a substantial risk for them to be charmed by Madame Aisha's authority?"

"Well, this place is run by the [Capital of Lilies] to begin with after all."

While looking at the happily smiling Madame Aisha from a distance, Liliana and Erica were whispering to each other.

As a side note, the [Capital of Lilies] was the magic association headquartered in the ancient city of Florence in Tuscany.

"In fact, the majority of employees are equipped with knowledge of magic. I've also heard that they have already used magic to protect their brains and minds beforehand as a precaution... Well, only to the extent that one could feel slightly relieved."

"Even Ena and you were also affected by Aisha-san's authority once."

Resonating strongly with heartfelt emotion, Ena agreed with Erica's opinion.

In any case, this trip had turned into a great expedition lasting almost two months. Nevertheless, upon returning to the modern era, they discovered that the calendar had merely advanced to the second day.

In the end, Godou and company had returned the next morning after the departing day.

"I suppose I should say: as expected of a journey through time. Truly absurd to an excessive degree."

Liliana's astonished murmurs were understandable.

The current guests at this ancient castle hotel in Tuscany not only included Saint Raffaello and Paolo but also Doni's butler, Andrea Rivera.

When Godou's group first returned to the hotel, Rivera had been out handling matters.

But upon returning, he was reunited with his foolish master.

"Come, Salvatore Doni. I'm sure you've fully prepared yourself to be sunk into the Mariana Trench together with a thirty-thousand-ton tanker. Perhaps now is the perfect opportunity to exile you from the surface world forever. Let's have a good discussion regarding this issue."

Dragging the neck of the whole commotion's principal culprit, Rivera dragged the man into another room...

In addition, these were not the only people present to welcome Godou and the other's return.

"Onii-sama! As well as Onee-chan and everyone else, thank goodness that you've all returned safe and sound!"

"We flew here from Japan after hearing about the emergency situation. Looks like the problem has already been resolved while we were on our way, that's really wonderful."

During the afternoon after their return, two Japanese had arrived at the hotel.

Yuri's younger sister, Hikari, and the History Compilation Committee's special agent, Amakasu Touma. Upon hearing that " Japan's Campione and his entourage are on a time traveling journey!?", Amakasu had immediately hurried to Italy. Furthermore, Hikari had also expressed her wish to come along.

"Although my original intention was to assist in Onii-sama's return, it ended up turning into a free trip to Italy."

After explaining the situation, Hikari added mischievously.

The Mariya family's second daughter was only twelve years old but was already a Hime-Miko in training. Presumably, that was precisely why her request to be sent on this mission was approved. Godou expressed his thanks from the bottom of his heart.

"It's the thought that counts. I'm sorry for making you come all the way here."

"Oh right. Although this doesn't count as a congratulations gift, I do have a present for you, Onii-sama. I'll give it to you later!"

It was difficult to imagine that someone so considerate and thoughtful was only just a sixth grader. Hikari smiled cheerfully while she spoke.

As a side note, the unexpected welcoming committee did not just include Japanese people. An hour after Hikari and Amakasu arrived, an American woman suddenly appeared in the hotel lobby.

"It's been a while, Kusanagi Godou."

"Annie-san!"

A missed friend, Annie Charlton.

She was the collaborator of Los Angeles' Devil King, John Pluto Smith. The cool beauty was dressed for midwinter in a trenchcoat and gray pants, matched by her short, fiery-red hair.

A dozen minutes or so later, Godou was sitting opposite Annie in the hotel's lounge.

Two steaming cups of espresso were placed on the table between them.

"Apparently, you've been doing as you please in fifth-century Gaul."

"If I had to describe it, I was the one restraining the willful and reckless Doni and Aisha-san..."

Godou raised mild objections against her sardonic remark.

However, Annie Charlton scoffed and said coldly:

"At 'Plutarch's Residence' in the Astral Plane... Smith heard from the old man who lives there. Reportedly, a certain Kusanagi Godou was building his harem in the land of ancient Gaul, enjoying a life of pleasure surrounded by numerous beauties."

"Th-They only gathered around me on their own without my consent, okay!"

Godou's group had made the Roman colonial city of Colonia Aggripina their final base of operations.

Out of excessive and unnecessary care, local bigshots had continually sent many beauties over to Kusanagi Godou—the man wielding the most influence and martial power in the region.

Back then, Kusanagi Godou's status in Colonia Aggripina was akin to that of a feudal lord.

To think she would know about the journey to the past, she truly lived up to her name as Smith's collaborator. Moreover, Annie's purpose for coming here was to retrieve the magic gun that had served as a trump card during the battle in Gaul.

Indeed. John Pluto Smith had entrusted his weapon to Liliana during that journey.

After returning the magic gun to her, Godou changed the subject.

"Oh right, what happened to history in that era after we returned? Did that whatever residence's old guy say anything else to Smith?"

"Nothing in particular that bears mentioning. Speaking of which, this is basically it."

Annie responded fluently to Godou's sudden questioning.

True to the image of a "capable woman," the cool beauty was intelligent and highly competent.

"Didn't history remain unchanged, broadly speaking? This is all thanks to history's corrective force and your side's devoted efforts."

"In that case, that Uldin guy also got killed by the 'King of the End'... Right?"

Uldin was the ancient Campione whom Godou had met in ancient Gaul.

Muttering Uldin's name, Godou began to ponder. Excessively strong, stubborn, a man who seemed unkillable. A warrior among warriors, a barbaric and crafty Devil King.

Although impossible to imagine, did that man still lose to the " King of the End" ultimately?

As though trying to dispel the heavy atmosphere, Godou brought his cup of espresso to his lips. Annie did the same. At this moment, Godou realized that there ought to be other things to talk about.

"Oh right, Annie-san. Thank you very much."

Although still seated, Godou bowed his head deeply.

"Sorry for troubling you to come all the way over to Italy from America to retrieve the gun. I should be the one paying a visit to Los Angeles instead."

"Pay it no mind. I happen to be passing by anyway."

Annie shrugged and accepted his apology generously.

"Due to my—our conflict against the [King of Flies] organization, Smith and I have not left Los Angeles for a long time already. Hence, I wanted to go on a sightseeing trip as a long-awaited break, arriving here with intentions to tour Europe. Visiting this place did not require me to go out of my way."

"Even so, you're still doing me a big favor. I'm really thankful to you."

The [King of Flies] sorcerer[14] organization led by Asherah had also appeared before at Nikkou's Toushouguu.

Godou had heard that they had been John Pluto Smith's mortal enemies in recent years.

Godou wondered if the care and concern expressed by the cool beauty stemmed from her worried feelings or from her natural personality.

In any case, Godou's gratitude towards her remained unchanged.

Thanking her once again, Godou continued with a smile:

"Also, please pass this message to Smith: 'Thank you for your care. I will repay the favor one day. I'll pay you a visit once I find the free time.'"

"After hearing such words, he will surely reply with the following."

Asked to deliver a message, Annie responded by imitating Smith's tone of voice:

"'Understood. In that case, you should prepare as rich a return gift as you can. I won't accept any complaints about the interest being too high so I hope you prepare yourself for that—' Presumably, a reply along such lines."

Annie's facial expression remained stiff, serious to a fault as always.

Nevertheless, she had changed her tone of voice to mimic the masked godslayer's speech of subtle pretension.

This unexpected playfulness brought a smile to Godou's lips.

Finally, Annie finished her espresso in one breath then quickly left the hotel.

"By the way, Aisha-san, can I ask you a few questions?"

"Sure, what would you like to ask, Doni-san?"

After spending four hours in a friendly conversation with the loyal butler then escaping, the young Devil King was sitting side by side with the adorable female Devil King (age indeterminate) whose appearance suggested teenage at most.

The location was the bar in a corner of the hotel.

Salvatore Doni and Madame Aisha were currently sitting at the bar together.

"So, Aisha-san, since you spend long periods traveling everywhere, you should be quite knowledgeable in a broad range of things, right?"

"Not at all. You are too kind. My level of knowledge is really nothing special... Fufufufu. So, what would you like to ask about, Doni-san?"

Despite her modest attitude, Madame Aisha's expression showed that she was greatly pleased by his praise.

She smiled back innocently at Doni who was taking a gulp of whiskey. Placed before her was a glass of fresh orange juice.

Meanwhile, two knights were currently sitting at a table in a corner of the bar, staring at the two Devil Kings.

Erica and Liliana. Without drawing attention, they were warily monitoring the movements of these two super dangerous characters.

"Basically, the 'King of the End' we met earlier in ancient Gaul. Have you seen that god in other time periods? Or heard things about him?"

"No, there's nothing... Oh wait, however."

Just as she was answering, the Madame revealed an expression of deep thought.

"During my travels in China during the Tang Dynasty, I once heard about a 'hero manifesting in the latter days of decadence' who, in his quest to pursue godslaying Rakshasha kings, headed to the farthest ends of the orient—the nation of Japan. Hearsay of that sort. Yes, I remember that it was a great monk at Chang'an who accidentally leaked the rumor."

"I see I see."

Saying that, Doni nodded in acknowledgement of the Madame's reply.

Perking up their ears to listen to this conversation, Erica and Liliana exchanged looks to communicate.

Salvatore Doni was a Devil King who would dance with a lighter in a powder keg with total nonchalance as long as it satisfied his desires. Furthermore, he had always been searching for great and formidable foes. To think a man like him was collecting information on the "King of the End"...

Most likely, he was unable to forget the power exhibited by the hero he had witnessed in ancient Gaul.

Of course, this was undoubtedly an ominous sign. Even though the time traveling incident had come to a conclusion, the dangerous embers surrounding the various Devil Kings were already gradually set aflame.

Part 2

"Eh, what happened to Amakasu-san?"

After seeing Annie off, Godou visited the Mariya sisters' room.

Inside the room were three people: Yuri who was lying in bed due to her fever, her little sister Hikari at the bedside taking care of her, as well as Seishuuin Ena sitting casually on a chair.

However, there were no signs of Amakasu Touma. Godou had expected him to be present.

"Could he have gone outside to ski or something?"

Godou brought up the first possibility that came to mind. Abundant snow had fallen just earlier in the lush Casentino forest and the surrounding mountain range. Currently, the outside world was a realm of silver.

In that case, skiing would seem like something attractive to try out as one of many winter sports.

Well, given Amakasu's laziness and indoor preference, Godou was doubtful that he would actually choose this type of sport.

Nevertheless, the answer waiting for Godou was even more unexpected than skiing.

"Oh, Amakasu-san said he's visiting the hotel's beauty parlor."

Ena's carefree answer surprised Godou.

"That guy went to the beauty parlor!?"

"Yes, Amakasu-san mentioned that he must get an oil massage no matter what."

Leaning her back against a cushion, Yuri sat up and provided additional explanation. Godou was reassured to find her more energetic than expected.

Furthermore, sitting by her elder sister's side, Hikari smiled.

"Saying that he needed to recover from the damage from sitting rigidly in the plane and the fatigue from driving all the way here from the airport of Florence, he ran over to make an appointment."

"Now that you mention it, I guess it's not that usual for a man to be frequenting that kind of place."

Rather than beauty treatment, Amakasu's aim was for relaxation.

Last time at Cape Inubou, Amakasu had also enjoyed all kinds of massages fully. Perhaps spending time in those types of places was his hobby. Godou understood.

"Well, it's no big deal anyway."

Smiling happily, Ena reached towards the bedside.

Placed there was a plate of apple slices, arranged neatly in rows. Picking a piece and popping it in her mouth, Ena continued:

"This time, the ninja's job is already being done by those people in Italy. He also said this is a pleasure trip."

"He's always busy and rushing everywhere after all."

"By the way, Onii-sama, I have something to report!"

Hikari suddenly smiled at the nodding Godou.

"I've already decided to enroll in Jounan Academy's middle school division starting this coming spring."

"In fact, Hikari already took the entrance exam last month... and passed successfully. Consequently, she will become our junior starting April. Please look after her, Godou-san."

After reporting energetically, Yuri bowed her head deeply while sitting on the bed.

Godou went "eh" and felt impressed. The school where he and the others were studying, Jounan Private Academy, required passing entrance exams to enter the middle school because it was not a public school.

"This is really something worth celebrating, but are you really okay with our school?"

"Yes, not only Onee-chan but Onii-chan and the other Onee-samas are also there. But apart from that, there's still one more thing to report. It's the present I mentioned earlier."

"Oh yeah, isn't that what you told me when you first arrived?"

"Although there's a couple of days left so it's a bit early, I'm not sure if I'll be able to see you on the actual day, so I'm giving it to you now in advance. Please accept this!"

"...?"

Hikari had taken out a square box from her bag. It was wrapped very beautifully. A slender box. It even had a cute ribbon wrapped around it.

What was this? Smiling, Hikari explained to Godou in his puzzlement.

"Yes, Valentine's Day will be arriving soon, Onii-sama!"

"...Oh right, I see now."

It probably contained chocolate inside. Figuring out the hidden contents, Godou smiled wryly.

Due to spending the past two months in early fifth-century Gaul, he had lost all calendar sense completely. However, calendars in the modern era were clearly displaying a date in early February.

"Also, since we go to different schools, it's quite true that we might not see each other on the actual day."

Speaking of which, it was still undecided whether they were going to return home before February 14 or not.

In light of that, even if Hikari gave her present a few days early, there was probably nothing wrong with that.

Godou gratefully accepted the wrapped box, smiling at the sixth grader who had given the present and could not help but stroke her head. If he did that to his own younger sister, she would

express her displeasure by saying "Don't treat me like a child!" However, Hikari simply responded with a happy and radiant smile.

As a side note, the older sister, Yuri, had shock written all over her face. Ena was also making an expression of great surprise.

"S-Speaking of which, I have totally forgotten about this day..."

"Ena paid zero attention to the calendar on this side. So it's Valentine's Day, huh? Ena has heard rumors before. It seems like it's a day for giving chocolate..."

"So, I guess I'll have to start thinking of a present for White Day and congratulating you on getting in our school."

Deciding that a return gift was definitely required for Hikari's show of care, Godou muttered.

"Hikari, is there anything you want?"

"Nothing in particular. But if I'm allowed to be 'indulged'—I want to go out with you to have fun, Onii-sama! Like amusement parks, theme parks or aquariums."

"Eh? Together with me?"

Although he wanted to fulfill this request as much as possible, Godou hesitated.

Taking a girl out to leisure spots made him feel a bit embarrassed. Unable to agree readily, he found it difficult to

answer. Of course, this did not count as a date. After all, she was a girl whose age made her like a little sister.

Nevertheless, Godou really felt embarrassed about spending time alone with a girl, just the two of them—

Seeing Godou searching for an answer, Hikari instantly said:

"Please, Onii-sama. You must take me, my Onee-chan, Ena-neesama, Erica-neesama and Liliana-neesama together somewhere to have fun!"

"Oh, I have to bring everyone along as well!?"

"Yes, of course!"

Being the only man in a group of girls, it still felt embarrassing. However, Godou believed that rejecting this request would be unseemly as an elder, so he smiled wryly and said with generosity:

"Sure, let's do that. Then we'll plan a schedule after returning to Japan."

"Really? I'm so happy!"

"When the day comes, I'll make sure you're treated as the main guest, Hikari."

"Fufufu. Please don't go out of your way, treating me the same as usual is fine."

While conversing with the upfront Hikari, Godou felt quite unbelievable.

Listening to the conversation that had just taken place before her eyes, Yuri was looking at her younger sister in utter surprise. Ena also looked as though she were whispering something like " Hikari really is amazing. She's got a bright future ahead."

"Mariya Hikari's potential really cannot be underestimated..."

After hearing about what transpired, Liliana commented with heartfelt emotion.

It was the second day after they had returned to the modern era . Going out by car, three girls had traveled to a town named Poppi, not far from the ancient castle hotel where they were staying. The time was currently still morning.

Seishuuin Ena was accompanying Mariya Yuri whose fever had subsided.

Currently, the trio was shopping at a supermarket. That said, being located in a rural European town, the shop was no different from a Japanese convenience store in scale. The selection of goods was not very complete.

Currently, the girls were browsing the goods offered in the confectionery corner of this kind of shop.

As expected, the shop did not offer the same abundant variety that Japanese stores would have during this occasion. Even so, Liliana still pondered in concentration while murmuring:

"Prioritizing the rescue of Kusanagi Godou while simultaneously taking into the account the possibility that he would survive through his own power, even going as far as to prepare chocolate in her luggage beforehand. She must have calculated that this would leave him the strongest impression in the event that she is able to hand him the present during the stay in Italy..."

"D-Do Hikari's considerations go that far?"

"Although probably not to the extent of a wily female fox like Erica who calculates everything, she should have considered the possibility of that outcome, hence preparing for it. That is what I feel. Also, the return gift is another matter that must not be overlooked."

The silver-haired knight spoke next to Hikari's older sister, Yuri.

"Also, there is combining the chocolate's return gift with the enrollment celebration. Despite a wish to have a date with Kusanagi Godou alone, she deliberately requested to take us along . This approach makes it easier to obtain Kusanagi Godou's consent and also minimizes the backlash relative to other methods. "

"By backlash, what you mean is... Coming from Ena and the rest of you?"

"Yes."

"Ena isn't going to reprimand Hikari for something of this level... Well, but perhaps Ena definitely would feel a bit jealous."

Commenting with slight surprise, Ena added. Liliana nodded.

"In any case, this is how things are. Using the incident known as 'giving chocolate,' Mariya Hikari has won a small victory. However, she is quite careful, or rather, I should say that she is subconsciously avoiding an excessive victory. Instead, by sharing happiness together with us all, she is probably aiming to avoid causing friction."

"Indeed, that may possibly be one facet of Hikari's."

Yuri murmured as though appraising her younger sister's personality.

"Very early on, she was already a child skilled in expressing her opinion without causing dissent in the surrounding people. Occasionally, I would feel quite envious of that..."

"Strategy... No, a keen sense in savoir-vivre."

"Perhaps this isn't a bad thing. Say, given what His Majesty is like, more girls will continue to gather around him in the future, right? If a girl like Hikari is present, harmony and compromise can

result in all sorts of things. There's that thing called human relations, right?"

Hearing Ena's philosophical outlook of resignation, Yuri and Liliana nodded in agreement.

The person in the center of their circle was someone who possessed the talent of "increasing the number of intimate partners without conscious intent." Even though he had the kind of personality that treated both genders equally, at the same time, he also had the kind of destiny that caused him to cross paths with women quite frequently—

"In any case, many issues exist in the current situation."

Liliana shrugged lightly as though summing up.

"The spot beside him will be yielded to Mariya Hikari for today. "

"Hikari is going to take a walk with His Majesty, just the two of them, right?"

"Ah yes. Hikari had Godou-san indulge her wish to go sightseeing in the town, so they went together."

"Well, I could have found some random reason to go along, but it is better to read the mood a little in times like these."

"Ena and you two also need to buy chocolate first."

"I am so sorry.."

The three girls conversed while selecting the goods they wanted to buy respectively. After checking out and paying, they left the supermarket.

As a land filled with natural scenery, this area consisted of rural settlements, of course. No modernized buildings were built. Compared to buildings constructed from steel-reinforced concrete, brick structures were far more common.

The atmosphere of ancient European towns was everywhere.

Furthermore, the thick volume of accumulated snow everywhere was almost like a makeup layer of white winter. Yet despite this kind of snowscape, the sky was cloudless for miles around.

Ignoring the possibility of sinking into the deep snow, this could be considered perfect weather for a walk in a certain sense.

Even making a quick and casual round in the vicinity would be filled with fun for Japanese people from the Far East.

"Oh, by the way, Erica-san seems to be monitoring King Salvatore at the moment, right?"

Walking in the lead, Ena asked.

"Yes. After a discussion with Sir Andrea and Erica's uncle, they assembled an emergency force to keep Sir Salvatore under surveillance. Of course, this should be enough to handle him if only he were a normal person."

Liliana's explanation was mixed with sighing.

"However, Sir Salvatore is no normal person. This is the headache-inducing part..."

"Well, Ena also knows clearly that King Salvatore is very curious about things related to the 'King of the End.' That god seems to be outrageously strong."

"The king manifesting at era's end—"

Hearing Ena murmur that name, Yuri suddenly whispered.

"Just as I mentioned before, I cannot see that god's true name at all... Be that as it may, there is a kind of ambiguous feeling."

"You actually saw something? As expected of Yuri!"

"If I had to describe the extent... It really is just a kind of ambiguous feeling. Perhaps the key to elucidating that god's origins exists as an unexpected form in Japan—located in our surroundings."

Mariya Yuri was an outstanding user of spirit vision.

Her capability in this area was perhaps the highest pinnacle in the world. Feeling deeply interested, Ena and Liliana listened to this hint revealed by the beautiful Hime-Miko.

Part 3

Godou and Hikari were visiting a town named Poppi, a rural commune that was quite small in area.

Its population numbered six or seven thousand at most. However, the town reportedly had fairly antique origins, tracing all the way back to ancient Roman times. Furthermore, this was where a castle and its associated castle town had been built by feudal lords ruling the area during the Middle Ages.

Streets from the Middle Ages were still preserved in this little town's historic zone.

Chapels, churches, the aforementioned castle town and other buildings dating back to that era were still standing.

These ancient streets were now adorned by a layer of snow like makeup. A simple stroll through this place was enough to evoke a sense of foreign exotic atmosphere that could not be experienced in Japan.

One could say it was definitely worth touring on foot while enduring the chilling cold.

"Say, isn't it time for a cup of hot coffee?"

"Then let's find a place to have lunch, Onii-sama!"

They had been strolling casually on the snow-covered streets for an hour and a half already.

As a result, Godou's body was already frozen stiff. It was probably the same for Hikari too.

That being said, the young girl who suggested lunch still looked quite cheerful in voice and demeanor. She looked like she was quite enjoying things. As a side note, the two of them were fully prepared with winter gear. Godou was wearing a soft jacket made of polyester for winter sports use, while Hikari was dressed in a white duffle coat.

In addition, they were wearing knitted caps and mittens while Hikari even had a scarf wrapped around her neck.

"If only there's something like a restaurant here."

Walking with Hikari, Godou muttered.

In fact, he had visited this town before.

That was during March last year when Erica accompanied him to track down the mysterious divine beast lurking in Casentino. Uldin's dragons from fifth-century Gaul had also made appearances here.

Nevertheless, the visit last time was extremely brief and thus had not offered Godou much of a chance to get to know the town.

Consequently, they had no choice but to continue their journey while looking around.

"Come to think of it, Shizuka sent me a text message."

Due to being accompanied by a young girl, Godou suddenly remembered about his younger sister.

The text message was received this morning before they headed out from the hotel.

"It was sent by Onii-sama's sister?"

"Yeah, because she's a sharp-tongued girl, the message was filled with ranting and griping. Oh well, I guess it's my fault after all for leaving home without saying anything."

Unlike the younger sister in the Mariya family, the Kusanagi household's younger sister had a personality that was a bit excessively strict.

Smiling wryly at this thought, Godou began to recall the contents of the text message where sentences like "Where the heck did you run off randomly to, idiot Onii-chan!" substituted for seasonal greetings.

That said, her words were filled with harsh reprimand for the older brother who had left without notice.

"She wrote a few things that made me quite curious. For example, she mentioned a chance encounter with the boy from the Christmas party—Stuff like that."

"The boy at the Christmas party—Speaking of which, that's probably Lu-san from Hong Kong."

Lu Yinghua was the only boy attending the Christmas party who matched the description.

Nodding at Hikari who had easily guessed the answer, Godou remarked with heartfelt feeling.

"I hope Shizuka didn't cause any trouble for Yinghua... Last time, she even said something weird by accident."

Godou remembered her commenting that Lu Yinghua had an underling flavor to him despite his arrogant demeanor.

Moreover, Shizuka was born with a personality like a bossy older sister's. A female member of the Kusanagi family who was destined to follow the footsteps of the mother with her natural vocation of queen—

Although it was already too late, Godou still prayed for his surrogate nephew who had terrible luck when it came to women.

On the other hand, while walking beside Godou, Hikari was more concerned with another issue.

"I still haven't gotten to know Shizuka-san and Lu-san very well . Next time I see them, I'll try my best to become better friends with them!"

"Eh? There's no need to devote so much effort into that."

"No no, as someone who serves by your side, Onii-sama, these sentiments are much obliged. Furthermore, I try hard in these areas partially for Onee-chan's sake—"

"....."

"I believe that it's necessary for us, the Mariya sisters, to have good relations with your family, Onii-sama. We sisters will continue to be in your care, Onii-sama♪"

As always, Hikari acted with such care and consideration that it was impossible to believe that she was still a young girl only in six grade.

But at the same time, Godou found it quite interesting.

The elder sister, Yuri, was a pure and noble young lady, quite detached from the mundane world, for better or worse. In contrast, Hikari was quite adept in handling worldly affairs with pertinence .

In terms of personality, there was nothing similar about these two sisters.

But perhaps this was precisely why they formed a combination that sustained balance—

"Hmm?"

Godou and Hikari were currently walking along a main street.

Ten-odd meters ahead was a familiar young man, featuring a head of blond hair and a tall build, roughly 185cm in height. A face displaying frivolity and lack of discipline—Salvatore Doni.

Dressed in a gray coat, he had a slender, cylindrical case slung on his shoulder.

Doni could be seen approaching a light van that was parked on the roadside. Without warning, he opened the door and sat inside.

Then the engine started immediately. The light van began to move quickly.

"Where's that guy planning to go...?"

Godou felt intrigued. Earlier, he had received Liliana's report.

The reckless troublemaker was apparently quite interested in the "King of the End."

That was what the female knight, akin to Kusanagi Godou's grand chamberlain, had reported.

'Of course, the King of the End is a divinity that has lain dormant for almost a thousand years. A being whose true identity remains unknown despite the Divine Ancestors' search efforts over the ages. It is essentially impossible for him to revive from something on the level of Sir Salvatore's minor commotions... But just to be safe, it is still necessary to keep Sir Salvatore under surveillance for now.'

And among various influential people including Andrea Rivera, Paolo Blandelli and Saint Raffaello, agreement was apparently unanimous. They were all familiar with and understood clearly the truth that Campiones were a troublesome race, always ignoring probabilities somehow, easily overcoming odds of 1%...

Godou hesitated as he watched the light van's departure.

Should he intervene "just in case"? But Madame Aisha was also someone who needed to be kept on priority surveillance. Which side was more important?

"Th-The person just now was Sir Salvatore, right?"

Noticing Godou's gaze, Hikari also looked at the light van.

"I've heard that he is your dear friend and fated rival too!"

"Who the heck is feeding such a rubbish and totally wrong profile to you!?"

"I-It's wrong? Last night when I encountered Sir Salvatore by chance and greeted him, that's what he said himself—"

Hearing Hikari's explanation, Godou felt his strength draining away.

Under those circumstances, the sixth grader had done nothing wrong in offering polite greetings on their first encounter, even when the other party was the world-renowned Campione. The senior who introduced himself totally erroneously was the one to blame.

"I knew it, I must chase after that idiot...!"

After Godou made his decision out of instantaneous anger rather than rational thought...

"Godou, perfect timing for you to be here!"

"...Erica!?"

Godou was surprised to be called by a gallant and beautiful voice.

The voice came from the vehicle lane. Godou turned his gaze to see a female rider approaching them on a mid-sized motorcycle, then stopping her vehicle on the roadside.

The motorcycle's paint job was a vivid shade of bright red whereas the leather suit was pitch black.

A rossonero combination of red and black. The female rider took off her helmet, revealing Erica's beautiful face and head of blonde hair.

"I'm currently following Sir Salvatore who has left this town, thinking it would be terrible if anything were to happen. Want to come along?"

"Yeah. Letting him run wild is too worrying!"

Godou instantly replied then looked at Hikari. The young Hime-Miko in training nodded immediately in response.

Godou's intention was for her to return to the hotel first on her own, having heard that she already had experience traveling overseas many times already despite being only twelve years old. More importantly, she was quite a clever girl. Godou did not worry.

Hence, Godou immediately climbed on to sit behind Erica, resulting in two people riding astride the motorcycle.

"Please hold on, Onii-sama! Please take this!"

Just as Erica was about to start the engine, Hikari quickly ran over.

Swiftly untying the scarf on her neck, she wrapped it tightly around Godou's neck instead.

Freezing-cold wind was currently blowing in the first place. Riding a motorcycle in such conditions would mean exposing the entire body to extremely strong, chilling wind.

Hikari was probably offering her scarf to Godou because she was worrying about this fact.

"Thanks. Let's go, Erica!"

Expressing his gratitude for the young girl's care, Godou reached his hands behind his waist.

He supported his weight by gripping the handle at the back of the seat. This was a horizontal bar for increasing safety for tandem riders.

The blonde partner instantly twisted the accelerator, causing the bright red motorcycle to start moving.

She raised the speed all at once. Within the blink of an eye, the motorcycle had sped off, leaving Hikari behind.

The motorcycle was able to move without hindrance because the accumulated snow had already been cleared from the roads.

Furthermore, traffic was quite low in volume. The motorcycle was currently trailing Salvatore Doni's light van by several hundred meters.

Godou was quite impressed with Erica's outstanding driving skills.

"You sure can ride well, not just horses but also this kind of thing!"

"Yes. During the Great Sage Equaling Heaven incident, I felt there was a need for this, so I started learning a lot subsequently. I'm now totally different from back then!"

Carrying two passengers, Godou and Erica, the mid-sized motorcycle sliced through the powerful wind, propelled by its 400cc engine.

To avoid getting drowned out by the noise of the wind, they had to raise their voices in order to converse. Just now, Erica was referring to the time when she had driven a four-wheeled automobile during the Great Sage Equaling Heaven incident, not a two-wheeled motorcycle.

Still, sitting behind the young Italian girl, Godou could understand.

Definitely quite different from before. Last time, Erica was skillfully controlling a car as a driver for the first time(!), using only her inborn talent and sense for driving.

However, back then, she clearly knew nothing about matters such as traffic regulations and driving techniques.

But this time, Erica not only controlled the mid-sized motorcycle with graceful motions but also did it without causing any trouble for the surrounding vehicles in motion.

Erica was driving the motorcycle smoothly along the flow of traffic. Completely stable and safe driving.

What she meant by learning a lot was probably knowledge and experience of driving on ordinary roads.

"Nothing less expected of Erica Blandelli—Godou, you could praise me like that, you know?"

"That's true. Even though you're always so busy, you still managed to learn such amazing skills. Although only half a year has passed since that time, I can't believe you've already obtained a driving license that's also usable in Italy!"

"Huh, what license?"

"...Hey Erica."

"Speaking of which, the matter of obtaining a driving license needs to be postponed."

"You're actually driving without a license!? I take back what I said!"

"Why does it even matter? There are no problems at all with my driving knowledge and vehicle control. Suppose a situation does arise where a driving license is needed, I also have magic to take care of things."

Erica replied, completely unremorseful.

In those circumstances, she was probably intending to use hypnosis magic to bewitch police personnel. Still maintaining a magnificent driving posture flawlessly, the [Copper Black Cross]'s premier knight was staring sharply at the light van that was traveling ahead.

As always, Erica's respect for common sense values was quite weak.

"Anyway, that's enough of that, Godou! Please hold on tight!"

"Then there's no helping it... Don't lose that idiot's trail!"

"Yes, you can count on me!"

Slicing through the winter season's chilling wind, the motorcycle sped along at seventy to eighty kilometers per hour—

Naturally, this meant getting frozen solid all over for the duration of the journey. Hence, feeling the scarf around his neck, Godou felt very grateful to Hikari.

Part 4

Doni's light van traveled west, cruising along Tuscany's state highways.

The light van traversed mountainous areas near mountain pass roads to reach Florence's provincial roads, then arriving in the vicinity of the provincial capital. But instead of entering the city of Florence, they continued westward.

Using provincial roads, Doni's contingent reached the Italian peninsula's western coast.

"Godou, why don't we stop nearby for a late lunch?"

Driving the mid-sized motorcycle, Erica had been maintaining a certain distance in their pursuit of Doni's light van, persisting for the past hour and a half or so.

But as soon as they arrived in the outskirts of Florence, she quickly decelerated and stopped her vehicle by the side of the road .

The light van they had been following soon departed into the distance. Since it stood to reason that Erica could not have made such an elementary blunder, Godou asked with certainty:

"Another tracking team is taking over here?"

"Yes, indeed. In fact, we are not the only ones tailing Sir Salvatore. Two other teams had also departed Casentino and are currently tracking him as well. Furthermore, I was supposed to pass the job along to other members of the [Copper Black Cross] near Florence in the first place."

"Just as I figured."

When experts in this area undertook tailing operations, it was natural to split into multiple teams.

Godou had heard about these arrangements before. Members of the Italian faction had apparently made flawless plans in this regard. Nevertheless, the blonde female knight frowned.

"Actually, using magic would be the best method of tracking... But because Sir Salvatore's senses are rather sharp, using magic would probably risk getting discovered by him instead."

As a side note, Godou was told that Doni had left his usual cellphone in his room before setting off.

Hence, it was not possible to confirm his location using various means such as call records or GPS. Eschewing gadgets like phones despite living in the modern era, he probably intended to go off the grid, out of contact.

"Next, we'll see if the organization picking up Sir Salvatore has any means of getting past our side—"

"Those guys are Doni's subordinates?"

"I doubt it. All the staff under his name have been commanded by his butler, Sir Andrea, to withdraw from the region of Tuscany. There shouldn't be anyone in that faction who's foolish enough to defy the strict order of the King's Butler."

"Then that means the idiot has summoned secret subordinates that even Andrea-san doesn't know..."

"That's probably right if you look at it that way."

Starting the motorcycle again, Erica drove towards the city of Florence.

Soon, she discovered an appropriate church and parked the motorcycle in the adjoining car park, not for the sake of sightseeing but to visit a nearby restaurant.

Finally, they had a chance to sit down and start enjoying a late lunch.

"Where does that guy Doni want to go?"

"He presumably intends to leave Tuscany. Going along that road which follows the Arno River, he will reach Pisa."

The Arno River.

Godou remembered Erica mentioning before that it was a great river that crossed Tuscany from east to west.

In addition, he had also heard of the other name.

"Pisa is the city that's known for the Leaning Tower of Pisa, right?"

"Yes. There's also the University of Pisa where Galileo Galilei studied as well as an airport. Rushing from Pisa, a thirty-minute drive is all it takes to reach Livorno—a harbor city facing the Ligurian Sea."

"A port at an airport, huh."

In other words, a gateway to sea and air travel.

Sitting in the restaurant while listening to Erica's deductions at the table, Godou remarked quietly.

As a side note, they were discussing while having various food including chickpea salad, cylindrical pasta mixed with lamb sauce, bistecca, Florentine mixed stew, unsalted bread unique to Tuscany, etc.

Just as they were almost done eating and having an after-meal coffee...

Erica's cellphone sounded briefly to indicate receiving a message. Glancing at the LCD screen, the communication device's owner shrugged lightly.

"Some unfortunate news. The tracking teams' valiant efforts have ended in failure with the target apparently lost. The people Sir Salvatore called over seem to be quite experienced in this kind of job."

The report presumably arrived via the text message. Erica sighed.

"Since Sir Salvatore is chasing after the shadow of the 'King of the End,' his destinations are limited. However, it's still quite difficult to narrow down a particular location without any clues. What should we do?"

Seeing Erica in deep thought, Godou suddenly remembered.

Before setting off for ancient Gaul, Godou had found out about Doni's unexpected connections. That man really did have old acquaintances whom he could trust to carry out secret tasks—

This time, it was Godou's turn to take out his cellphone.

Using this tool which he had put aside and ignored throughout his time traveling journey, Godou tried dialing a number, a task he had not done for quite some time.

On the fifth ring, the international call connected.

'It's been quite a while, Honored Uncle. I've already heard news of your return from Madame Aisha's cave. It's wonderful that you are safe and sound.'

"Well, many things did happen."

The receiver of the call was the young master and leading subordinate in Hong Kong's Lu family.

He trained in martial arts under the instruction of Kusanagi Godou's "sworn elder sister" Luo Cuilian as her one and only direct disciple. Consequently, he revered Godou as his master's younger brother, considered an uncle by oriental social hierarchy...

"How's life lately? Things going well?"

'Yeah, thanks to you, Honored Uncle, my days are going smoothly. The only task I have remaining for today is to get a good night's rest.'

"Huh? It should be roughly ten o'clock over there for you, right? Isn't it a bit early for bed?"

Italy was separated from Japan by a time difference of eight hours. The clock hands on Godou's side were currently pointing at two in the afternoon, which meant that the time over in Japan could hardly be called late night. Godou was quite surprised.

For a fourteen-year-old youth's bedtime, wasn't it a bit too early ?

'If there's nothing special to do, I will sleep as early as possible. That's because I have to do morning training before dawn every morning.'

"That's getting up a bit... No, quite early."

'Although people are always surprised to find out, this is the truth indeed.'

A young leader from a criminal organization based in Hong Kong. If one were to judge purely from a description of this kind of character, the impression given would be someone who often stayed up late and indulged in night life instead. And taking it a step further, Lu Yinghua also lived in Shinjuku's Kabukichou, one of Japan's top entertainment and red-light districts.

However, Lu Yinghua explained in a calm tone of voice:

'Included in Luo Cuilian's martial arts is an exercise involving " the cultivation of internal skills while worshiping the rising sun of dawn." Starting from the age of three, every morning, I was forced—no, asked—to train in this, so I ended up acquiring this habit unwittingly, that of rising from bed as early as eighty-year-old geezers.'

"Ah... So Nee-san is the cause as well."

'She described it as absorbing the cleanest and purest solar energies so as to augment internal skills.'

Another confession reminiscent of the harsh childhood he had endured.

Internal skills. Godou currently knew this was what the Japanese called *kikou* and known to westerners as breathing exercise or spirit cultivation.

Having started his training by Luo Cuilian's side under her tutelage from early childhood, Lu Yinghua had consequently acquired various negative assets such as misogyny, a sadistic attitude towards beautiful female fighters, as well as professional cooking skills despite his young age of fourteen...

"By the way, you met my younger sister Shizuka earlier, right?"

'So you have heard, Honored Uncle? Yeah, I ran into her by chance a few days ago in Shinjuku.'

"...She didn't cause you any trouble, did she?"

Sensing slight anxiety in the prideful surrogate nephew's tone of voice, Godou asked as a test just in case. In response, Lu Yinghua answered with a slight sigh.

'No trouble worth mentioning. However, well, she truly does have a capacity for boldness as befits her position as Honored Uncle's sister—That's basically what I felt keenly.'

"How should I say this? I'm really sorry."

'It's nothing, don't worry about it. She really didn't cause me any trouble at all. Also—"

"Also?"

'I've been inspired slightly to resolve myself to escape the next time I see her.'

"I see. If you ever notice her trying to say anything, don't think and just run away immediately. Even as her elder brother, I believe that's the wisest choice."

'Understood. Also, is there anything you'd like me to do for you , Honored Uncle?'

As expected of Yinghua. He instantly figured out that the main subject had not been broached yet.

"Actually, something a bit troublesome has come up over here in Italy."

Godou briefly summarized Salvatore Doni's worrying movements, finally adding:

"So last time, you mentioned it, right? You've got friends in Chinatown over here who do dirty work for that idiot Doni. I have a feeling that those people are involved in this incident too."

This was something that he had heard Yinghua mention before the trip to ancient Gaul.

'I do remember such a conversation. Well then, I'll go get some information from those people.'

"You don't need to do that. Just tell me how to contact those people. We can handle that side of things."

Hearing Godou's response, Lu Yinghua laughed malevolently.

'Haha. Indeed, it'll be faster and easier if your side does it, Honored Uncle. I understand the particulars now.'

After hanging up, several minutes passed.

Godou's cellphone then received a message. Naturally, the sender was Lu Yinghua. Godou showed the address, telephone number and other information on the LCD screen to Erica.

Hence, the blonde beauty known as the Diavolo Rosso smiled malevolently in a manner as befitted her title.

"So it's my turn next, eh? Fufu, leave it to me. Given the mighty name of Kusanagi Godou and the eloquent tongue of Erica Blandelli, ten minutes are enough for this sort of thing."

In actual fact, eight minutes was sufficient.

Calling herself the delegate of Japan's Campione, Erica successfully contacted the [King's Company], a shady organization based in the Chinatown of the ancient capital, Rome, thereby quickly obtaining the necessary information from the company's representative through verbal means.

Using the names of Godou and the [Copper Black Cross] as threats, she also placated the other party with sweet words at the same time.

Still the same as always, what an outstanding negotiator she was.

"Since we've clarified Sir Salvatore's approximate destination, let's try some fancy tricks, shall we?"

"Fancy tricks?"

"Yes. Let's play a slight trick so that we can catch up to Sir Salvatore."

Godou's cellphone was currently placed on the table in the restaurant. Pointing at his cellphone, Erica suggested in a delighted tone of voice:

"Hey Godou, I have someone else I'd like to contact."

Hence, several hours passed. The sun was almost setting completely. Night was just about to start.

Godou and Erica's location had shifted away from the region of Tuscany in central Italy to somewhere else all of a sudden. Taking a flight from Pisa's Aeroporto Galileo Galilei, the two of them had flown for roughly an hour in the southwestern direction, crossing the Mediterranean Sea to reach the island of Sardinia—Italy's westernmost autonomous region.

Even as an island, Sardinia was only slightly larger than Shikoku, the smallest and least populous of Japan's four main islands.

Whether for Godou or Erica, this island was where everything had started.

Exiting the airport at the island's regional capital, Cagliari, Godou and Erica followed the guides (Caucasian men with scary-looking faces who were clearly not "reputable" people despite their neat-looking black suits) who were waiting for them. The pair was then led to be seated in a white BMW.

Their destination was a luxury hotel in the city of Cagliari.

Then they arrived before two men who were chatting cheerfully at a restaurant inside the hotel.

Godou recognized both men.

One was a blond and handsome man with a frivolous face, Salvatore Doni.

The other was an obese old man. He was dressed gallantly in a high-class custom-tailored suit, puffing on a thick cigar, displaying dignified solemnity as befitted the mafia—

His public identity was the boss of the Sicilian mafia that made their stronghold on the island of Sicily.

Secretly, he was the commander-in-chief of the magic association [Panormus]. Walter Zamparini.

"Ohoh, Kusanagi Godou! Sir Salvatore and I are waiting for you together!"

"Jeez... Godou, you're such a bad man too."

Zamparini's eyes shone while he was welcoming Godou. On the other hand, Doni shrugged.

"I can't believe you ordered this old guy to capture my friends at the airport. You even asked him to pass along that whatever ' wait for me until I catch up' message."

"It's your fault for leaving without your cellphone."

After giving Doni a terrifying glare, Godou continued:

"Oh well, even if you kept your phone, you can still cut off contact by switching the power off."

"Hahahaha, not like it matters. Even if I'm out of touch for a month or two, Andrea can get along fine on his own."

"That's the kind of 'so-what' attitude from the man who fled from Andrea-san's side."

At this moment, the hotel attendant walked over to the table and pulled out a chair for Erica.

The blonde beauty sat down swiftly and naturally.

Godou took his seat in the remaining chair. Thus, dinner was ready to start.

As a side note, Erica had already changed and was now wearing a short, red, one-piece dress with a black cardigan of lace.

"Uncle Zamparini, I'm so sorry for causing you trouble."

"Don't worry, Blandelli. I wouldn't want to miss this rare chance to meet Kusanagi Godou again after so long either. I must thank Sir Salvatore for being so understanding and willing to accompany these old bones of mine for a chat."

Old Man Zamparini smiled proudly and took a puff of his cigar.

The Campione of Swords had made his way to Sardinia with assistance from the [King's Company].

After learning of this fact, Erica had advised Godou to contact Zamparini. Godou proceeded to do so and made his request: "I hope you can catch Doni's contingent at the Cagliari airport, prevent them from leaving and pass to Salvatore Doni my intention to have a chat between Campiones tonight."

Added as a final note was permission to resort to violence if necessary.

Hence, this immensely wealthy old man and Sicilian mafia boss had taken his Cessna private jet, spending merely an hour to hurry from Sicily over to Sardinia. Then arriving at the airport before Doni's group, he had fulfilled Godou's request magnificently.

Naturally, the same request had been made of the magi in Sardinia.

Nevertheless, few possessed the courage capable of opposing Doni, who stood as Italy's Devil King, to force the idiot into " having a chat nearby."

Hence, that was why Erica had named Zamparini of Sicily as the candidate.

She had nominated the most broad-minded man of influence who lived relatively close to Sardinia.

In the past, this old man had also provided support during the battle against the divine king, Melqart. Although he had Godou backing him, it was no less of an accomplishment for him to have fulfilled Godou's expectations splendidly—

"Oh well, since Godou already found out my destination, I knew someone was going to catch up eventually."

"You really came to this island to see her—Lucretia-san?"

Godou brought up a nostalgic name.

Lucretia Zola. Also known as the Witch of Sardinia. At one point, she had been a researcher who had joined Divine Ancestor Guinevere to seek the identity of the "King of the End."

"Completely correct. I heard from somewhere before that she's the person in Italy who knows the most details about the 'King of the End' and the war gods of the past and present, east and west."

Despite being a fool to the core, every now and then when dealing with important matters, Doni would display competence that one must not overlook.

Doni winked while exhibiting this familiar special skill.

"The war god we met in ancient Gaul is still sleeping somewhere on the Earth, right? It should be quite fun to wake him up for a bit, or at least some hints could be found. That's what I'm thinking."

"You can't wake up that kind of dangerous god, not even for a bit, okay!?"

Scolding Doni for his idiotic nonsense, Godou then muttered:

"Besides, even England's Gascoigne spent many years and still couldn't figure out the guy's true identity. An investigation of your level will surely fail, right?"

"How will I know if I don't try...? Oh yeah, would you like a drink?"

"The legal drinking age in Japan is twenty."

"But look, isn't Erica Blandelli drinking right now?"

"W-When did you start..."

"I'm already sixteen, Godou, which is an age allowed to drink in Italy. Hey Godou, doing as the Romans do is only polite, isn't it?"

"In that case, let us prepare some drinks for Your Highness. — You there, bring us everything."

Apart from Godou, the other three were chatting amiably with a wine glass in one hand each.

Furthermore, Zamparini had summoned the bartender, pointed at the first page of the wine list—a selection filled solely with expensive wines—and recklessly ordered "bring us everything."

Seeing that, Godou instantly cried out:

"How can I finish this much!? No wait, I wasn't planning on drinking a single drop in the first place!"

"Don't be so rigid and conservative. Let us drink to our hearts' content tonight!"

Calmly ignoring the Campione's refusal, Zamparini even laughed boldly and cheerfully.

He was an old man with outstanding courage indeed. In excellent spirits, Zamparini downed his glass of red wine in one breath.

"Ohoh, that reminds me. Kusanagi Godou, I have a granddaughter who just turned two."

"A granddaughter? She must be very cute."

Of course, Godou had never seen this granddaughter of Old Man Zamparini's.

But in the grandfather's eyes, surely she must be cuter than anyone else in the world. Taking commonplace preconceptions into account, Godou expressed agreement matter-of-factly.

"Hehe, excellent judgment, Your Highness. Yes indeed, it is as you say, it would not be an exaggeration to call my granddaughter a peerless beauty... So, what are your thoughts?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"In other words, will you accept her as your lover? Kusanagi Godou, I have also heard that you choose to have many beauties serving by your side, thus building a splendid harem. Hohoho, as expected of the promising young Campione whom I, Zamparini, hold in high regard. Now that is truly a Devil King's style of magnificence!"

"H-Hold on. That's a misunderstanding!"

"You are too modest. In my view as the grandfather, my granddaughter is definitely a beauty worthy of serving you. Please do consider it!"

"Come on, you can't actually tell if a two-year-old baby is a beauty or not!"

Met with a reunion with this old man from Sicily whom Godou had not seen for so long, the night gradually grew late amidst a lively atmosphere.

Part 5

Despite insistent urging from the host, Godou finished his dinner without drinking a single drop of alcohol.

Although Erica had drunk many glasses of wine, she did not show any signs of drunkenness.

Meanwhile, the two adult men, Salvatore Doni and Zamparini, kept opening vast numbers of bottles with hearty splendor. In this manner, the banquet held in the restaurant came to an end.

"Since the person he's going to see is Lucretia-san, I guess it should be okay to leave Doni unattended."

Godou muttered. Currently, he was in a private room in the hotel.

Zamparini had also booked rooms in this hotel where the restaurant was located. Hence, Godou decided to gratefully accept the old man's kind offer.

The next day's plans involved keeping Doni under supervision and heading over to visit Lucretia's residence.

"Since he waited until now to find Lucretia-san for information, then I guess he really doesn't know anything about the 'King of the End.' Looks like it's okay even if I leave him alone."

Salvatore Doni had gone missing during daytime.

At the time, Godou and Erica had felt worried. Perhaps the Campione of Swords had secretly obtained important information from ancient Gaul about the "King of the End." Furthermore, using this knowledge, he was very likely planning to reawaken the Devil King-slaying hero in the modern era.

But standing next to Godou, Erica was frowning with an expression of deep thought.

"It might be risky to believe it's okay to leave him alone. Consider this. Aren't you people the race that frequently digs out the roots of conflict? I believe that chances are not entirely zero for Sir Salvatore to suddenly come across important information regarding the 'King of the End' purely by accident..."

"Maybe. But I don't want to tie myself to that guy, that's all."

Objecting dryly, Godou then said:

"In any case, I'll keep Doni under watch for now. I also want to see Lucretia-san again after such a long time."

"I phoned her just now but she seems quite reluctant. She said she doesn't want you two to come."

"Why!?"

"Isn't it perfectly natural? It's no exaggeration to call it a disaster when Campiones are trying to visit your home. Rather, it's something to be avoided even if it requires pretending you're away from home."

Erica smiled with a chuckle, causing Godou to feel at a loss.

The people around him always touted Kusanagi Godou as "one of the typical Campiones," a heaven-sent child of disaster. Yes, it could not be helped that there are areas contributing to this image but come on, at least don't lump me together with Doni—

That was how Godou wanted to retort but there were more important things than raising objections right now.

"Hey Erica... Aren't you acting a bit too casual?"

"Oh my, why would you think that?"

Having just exited the bathroom, Erica was dressed in a bathrobe.

Indeed. After taking a shower in Godou's room for some reason, she had dried her wet hair with a towel then started walking around in the room in this unguarded state.

Since Erica was wearing nothing except for a white bathrobe, the lines of her slender body were clear to see.

Even her cleavage was visible. Thus, Godou frantically averted his gaze.

Just hurry back to your own room already, isn't this putting me in a weird state of mind? Godou agonized in his mind.

Unaware of his internal thoughts, Erica sat down on the bed, crossing her legs.

She even went as far as to openly display her beautiful legs of pristine white.

Feeling his heart pounding uncontrollably, Godou turned his gaze away again.

However, he also noticed a certain detail. Erica was sitting on one of the beds in the room whereas Godou was currently sitting on the other bed...

Indeed. This room contained two beds.

Was this actually a double room meant for two people to stay overnight...?

"...Erica. Isn't it time for you to go back to your own room—"

"Listen, Godou. You must have realized by now, haven't you? This is also the room where I'll be staying."

"In other words, we'll be spending the night in the same room...?"

"That's really slow of you. Do note that Zamparini is the one who arranged for this room. Didn't we sleep in the same room last time when we were staying overnight at his mansion?"

"....."

"His original intention was to book a suite that even had Monaco royalty making their stay in the past. But thinking that you'll surely refuse, Godou, he changed it to this room."

"Well, that kind of suite would be a total misfit for my status as a high school student..."

That being said, the current room was also plenty spacious but at least it was still within range of a double room's standards.

As expected of Erica, she understood Godou's way of thinking quite well.

Ever since meeting her, not even a year had passed. Yet the two of them had already survived numerous battles together, becoming comrades who knew each other's temperament thoroughly. Moreover, they were special partners as well.

Even so, if he had to spend a night with a girl in the same room —

Godou suddenly realized. Speaking of which, he had already done this sort of thing many times in the past.

"You know, Godou."

Also, Erica had come up before him by the time he knew it.

Getting off the opposite bed, she gazed into Godou's face.

"You should have experienced spending nights with a number of girls apart from me already, haven't you? Isn't it time for you to grow accustomed to this sort of thing?"

"....."

"Any objections?"

"None... I guess."

"Very well. Now that's my Godou. His Majesty the Devil King whose bestial desires cannot be satiated by me, Erica Blandelli, alone, but must repeatedly extend his poisonous fangs towards other girls."

Erica sat down beside him. Now the two of them were sitting shoulder to shoulder on the bed.

"Although you've already surprised me many times, Godou... This is still the most surprising thing. Despite clearly being a blockhead who has no idea how to get along with girls, you somehow end up causing Yuri, Lily and Ena-san to fall into your hands."

Sighing once, Erica shrugged.

"I suppose this is a time when I could say something along the lines of 'You always fail to understand my feelings—' But that would run contrary to my style, Erica Blandelli's. It's already too late to say that sort of thing. It would be undignified. Although I am definitely a slightly vainglorious woman, perhaps this type of personality ends up the worse off during times like these."

Naturally, Kusanagi Godou had no right to complain even if he were stabbed by the girls faction, with Erica first and foremost. Apart from listening respectfully, he had no other choice.

No wait, perhaps it would not be too much even if he knelt on the floor...?

While Godou could not help but enter deep thought, something kissed him on the cheek. A light, teasing kiss from Erica.

"Let's end that subject here. However, in return, you must promise me this. Please, even if you're just going through the motions, please do not ever say that you wish to escape me—escape our feelings."

"Erica..."

"If you would promise me that, I could turn a blind eye to your deplorable behavior. How about that?"

Godou did not answer the girl who had expressed her feelings in such a calm and resigned manner.

Instead, he drew his face close and sealed Erica's lips with his own. Erica accepted him without resisting. Although the two of them had engaged in passionate kissing many times in the past, they did not covet each other's lips or entangle their tongues together this time.

Simply pressing their lips together, they kissed quietly.

Nevertheless, the emotions involved were perhaps even more powerful than usual. This was true whether for Godou or for Erica.

"May I stay here now...?"

"Yeah."

Seeing Erica ask uncharacteristically in a cute manner, Godou nodded slightly stiffly.

She picked up a slender slab-shaped object, peeling off the wrapping paper and the foil beneath.

"I have a present for you, Godou. Open your mouth."

"...Ah."

Godou obeyed without a fuss because he already knew her intentions.

Holding the slab-shaped object in her mouth, Erica bit through it with her teeth. Roughly one third of the slab remained on her lips. Furthermore, out of everyone Godou knew, the most

gorgeous and beautiful maiden was drawing her face close once again—

Using a kiss, she delivered the slab-shaped object into Godou's mouth.

The sweetness of chocolate expanded in his mouth. Erica was feeding the slab-shaped chocolate to Godou via mouth-to-mouth. In addition, her action was not limited to simply feeding the sweet confectionery to him.

Along with the chocolate, Erica inserted her tongue inside as well.

Cautiously, she used her tongue to feel for the chocolate inside Godou's mouth, even going as far as to lick Godou's tongue thoroughly together with the slightly saccharine taste, savoring everything patiently.

In turn, Godou savored Erica's tongue together with the chocolate.

While kissing in this manner, the two of them began to eat chocolate together.

Using the tips of their tongues, they began to push the chocolate around. Moving from Godou's mouth into Erica's mouth then back to Godou's mouth again. Stirred by their tongues and saliva, the chocolate gradually melted, staining their lips.

Godou thoroughly savored the flavor while licking the sweetness in Erica's mouth.

Likewise, Erica moved her tongue and lips, licking the sweetness in Godou's mouth. It was only natural that their lips would get stained by chocolate, but together with its taste, they licked each other clean with their tongues.

In the end, it took the two of them wholly three minutes or so to finish the piece of chocolate.

"Hey Godou.... How about... we eat a bit more...?"

Hearing Erica whispering softly before his eyes, Godou felt incomparably excited inside.

"Fufufufu. Although I am aware that it is customary for Japanese girls to present gifts of chocolate to boys this time of the year, I originally had no intention of giving you any. This sort of thing fails to interest me. But after hearing that Hikari had already succeeded in giving you chocolate, I changed my mind."

The young beauty, always radiant with intellect, was now showing a smile full of bliss before his eyes.

This was proof that she had entrusted her heart to Godou and it heightened his desire to shower Erica with tender affection.

"Although Hikari is a cute junior, it would be a taint to the name of Erica Blandelli if she always steals the first move. What are your thoughts, Godou...? I think this should be enough for me to prevail over her."

This was most likely a piece of chocolate that she had simply bought in a nearby shop.

Nevertheless, Godou experienced a mind-numbing feeling after savoring that taste. Erica was probably feeling the same way. Gazing into each other's eyes, they began to kiss again, this time without the chocolate.

"Erica...!"

"I could continue to feed you, Godou? Or perhaps, after the confectionery, let us carry on by making love? So long as you wish, I shall—"

"Erica!"

Seeing as she had said this much already, there was no point in suppressing himself any further.

Besides, the two of them were sitting on a bed to begin with. Driven with passion, Godou pushed Erica down on her back. As a result, her bathrobe fell open, revealing the valley between her breasts.

"Godou...!"

Pushed down, Erica cradled Godou's neck in her arms, hugging him tightly.

Godou not only felt her body's warmth but also the heavy and elastic sensations of her breasts, pressed tightly against his body, causing his excitement to soar even further.

Immediately, Godou took her lips. In turn, Erica accepted Godou's intensely passionate kiss.

As a result, locked in mutual embrace in this manner, the pair repeatedly pressed their lips together in ecstatic fervor, sucking on each other's mouth, caressing tongue against tongue lovingly again and again. Exchanging light bites on the earlobes, they even sucked on each other's neck.

In this manner, the two of them repeated such behavior nonstop for five or six minutes—

Finally, Godou pushed his body up.

Separating from Erica's body, he interrupted the embrace. Rather than recovering sanity, it would be better described as a feeling of unstoppable momentum. Honestly speaking, he definitely felt inclined to embrace Erica and continue.

"Is this where we stop, Godou?"

"Th-That kind of thing is too early for us..."

He had rejected Seishuuin Ena's request with the same reason in the past.

Kusanagi Godou was undoubtedly a lucky bastard. These girls were all so adorable that they were irresistible. Be that as it may, if he were to accept them at this stage, his fangs were going to be dulled—

This type of worry stemmed from his own willfulness and selfishness.

"Seriously. Clearly I am ready any time..."

Although Godou's behavior was quite impolite in a certain sense, Erica still remained smiling.

It was the same smile of bliss that he had seen earlier. Noticing Godou's puzzled gaze, she spoke in an intoxicated tone of voice:

"Naturally, Godou, I do wish you could carry through to the very end. However, I shall forgive you tonight. Knowing you desire me greatly in turn is enough to fill me with joy already."

"Erica..."

"Ah yes. As your punishment, I shall sleep with you tonight."

Erica declared, still bearing a smile of happiness on her face. Godou went "Eh!?" in surprise. Seeing Godou in a panic, Erica chuckled and continued to announce malevolently:

"It's because you won't accept my willful demands, that's why. When clearly I hope with sincerity to deepen our relationship, Godou, to make my body and soul yours."

"....."

"I won't be satisfied unless you agree to this level of compensation."

"I-If I sleep together with you, I might not be able to hold back!"

"When that happens, please dispense with your worrying, go ahead and whisper your love in my ear. I shall entrust my body to you immediately. Fufu, wouldn't it be wonderful if we could share the same dream tonight, Godou!?"

This was a declaration Erica issued in unusually high spirits.

Nevertheless, Godou was ultimately unable to refuse this decree—utterly shocked, he was unable to raise further objections.

Part 6

"I see. So you would like to investigate the mystery of the 'King of the End', Sir Salvatore?"

Lucretia Zola murmured in her usual, aloof tone of voice.

Oliena was a town in Sardinia's interior, a small autonomous community almost on the same scale as the town of Poppi that Godou and Erica had visited the previous day.

The Witch of Sardinia had made her residence precisely in this town.

Godou, Erica and Doni were currently facing Lucretia while she was sitting casually on the living room sofa.

As a side note, although they had spent the previous night at Cagliari, that city was actually quite far from Oliena. Even traveling by car would take substantial time. Consequently, Zamparini had rented a helicopter(!) to send Godou, Erica and Doni here.

Moreover, saying he had things to do, the old man had returned to Sicily early in the morning...

"Truly what a disaster for the world, to think that another Campione after Prince Alec has appeared to track down the hero king's trail. Oh well, since you wish to obtain all available information regarding the 'King of the End,' Sir Salvatore, how could a mere witch as I possibly have the right to refuse..."

"Oh no oh no, don't say that."

Doni waved his hands in response to Lucretia's sarcasm.

"I don't care about mysteries and stuff like that. I just want you to tell me the fastest way to revive the 'King of the End.' Can you do that?"

" "....." "

"It's not a question of can or can't. Rather, I am not privy to the greatest riddle. I am unable to respond to your demand, Sir Salvatore."

Despite calling Godou "young man," Lucretia used polite speech towards Doni. Nevertheless, her lethargic gaze clearly displayed her regretful sentiments towards the foolish king.

As a side note, the two who were listening to the conversation from the side, Godou and Erica, remained silent throughout.

Rather than a wish to avoid getting involved blindly, it would be better to say that they found oral intervention to be troublesome too.

"I see. Then if there's any summarized info on the 'King of the End' or something like an introductory book, please deliver it to my butler."

"...Understood. It will be done."

"Oh my, thanks. You're such a great help."

"Not at all. Glad to be of assistance."

"Y-You great big idiot..."

Godou glared viciously at the frivolously smiling Doni.

"If it's something like this that could have been settled over the phone, don't do such an outrageous disappearing act! Do you know how many people are getting yanked around!?"

"Hey now, Godou. Asking someone for a favor over the phone is very poor manners."

"Tsk. Only at times like these do you actually say something right..."

"And if I actually succeeded in finding out the revival method, I could set off immediately. Free of that annoying Andrea!"

Winking, Doni looked like a mischievous little brat.

Godou wondered if it would be right to say that Doni was acting the same as always, in terms of flawlessly concealing the

hidden agenda behind his foolish behavior. In any case, the purpose of visiting Lucretia's residence was essentially fulfilled.

"Then I'll be on my way. If any new info comes up, I'm counting on you!"

Cheerfully leaving these words behind, Doni made his way towards the living room's entrance.

Despite arriving merely twenty minutes ago, he was already taking his leave. Whether in personality or behavior, this was very typical of the King of Swords.

After nodding to thank Lucretia, Godou also followed Doni to leave.

Erica did the same. Ever since entering this house, she had not said a single word.

This was probably out of deference to her position as a knight in front of two Campiones. However, Erica did not intend to act reserved the whole time. Before coming here, the Diavolo Rosso had already made preparations.

Seeing Erica signal with her eyes, Godou nodded lightly in response.

After reaching the corridor, walking in the lead, Doni went to the front door.

Erica followed him. However, Godou alone turned in the opposite direction—making his way to the depths of the residence.

He took leisurely steps as though heading to the washroom. But as soon as Doni and Erica were outside, he doubled back to the living room. Seeing Godou return, Lucretia smiled with delight.

"How nostalgic, young man."

"Huh?"

"Do you still remember? The first time you visited this home, you also left with Miss Erica before my eyes before returning on your own. To have a private conversation with me."

"...Now that you mention it, that really did happen."

Prompted by Lucretia, Godou remembered it too.

Last time, there was a need to talk in Erica Blandelli's absence. But this time, he was meeting Lucretia face to face under Erica's arrangements.

Godou would never have expected this change in circumstances within less than a year's worth of time.

Godou smiled wryly. This would have been totally unthinkable back when he made his first visit to Italy.

Furthermore, his relationship with Erica even developed to the current state—

Godou recalled the scene this morning. Stuck in a predicament where he had no choice but to share beds with Erica, he was

naturally quite troubled and ended up spending a sleepless night as a result.

Even so, sleep still crept upon him unnoticed.

Also, when he woke up...

Godou saw Erica's sleeping face on the same bed.

The beautiful maiden, more gorgeous than anyone he knew, her dignified face was as adorable as a sleeping angel's. For a moment, he watched in mesmerization. But due to sensing Godou's movements, Erica also awakened. While rubbing her sleepy eyes, she smiled with absolute innocence and purity...

Erica's expression, completely different from her usual self, leaving Godou's emotions unsettled ever since getting up in the morning.

"I never expected a day when I would re-encounter Miss Erica and you in this manner. Although I do have the intention to live that long, never in my wildest dreams would I have expected my old friend's grandson to become a Campione."

Gazing at Godou, Lucretia's eyes carried a gentleness that she seldom showed, similar to that of a grandmother and an older sister at the same time.

"Well then, it's almost time to broach the main subject. I've already heard over the phone from Miss Erica. You have apparently obtained a clue regarding the 'King of the End', haven't you?"

"Yeah, I guess. A certain goddess's last words."

During New Year's earlier, Godou had battled against the goddess Circe in the South Seas over Malaysian territory.

These were the words she left behind on her dying breath:

—"Ah yes, let me take these final moments to enact my vengeance on His Highness Alexandre for betraying my love. Regarding the great hero whom he seeks, you should search the Argo's genealogy if his true name is what you desire. I reveal this secret only to you alone, Kusanagi-sama!"

While saying that, her face displayed a smile more adorable than any beautiful maiden's.

Despite clearly knowing the answer to the mystery Alexandre Gascoigne sought, she remained silent during the time spent with him.

Furthermore, Godou was finally able to pass this message along to Lucretia.

Transmitted to the woman who had devoted her life at one point towards researching the "King of the End."

"...The Argo huh. The name of the ship built by the hero Jason in order to obtain the Colchis kingdom's secret treasure—the Golden Fleece—the Argo is precisely that vessel's name. Dozens of heroes boarded this ship, surmounting countless hardships to make their way towards Colchis..."

Murmuring, Lucretia recounted a story from Greek mythology.

"However, what the goddess said was 'the Argo's *genealogy*.' In that case, should the Argo itself be considered... Hmm?"

"What's wrong?"

Seeing Lucretia suddenly fall silent, Godou inquired.

But the Witch of Sardinia did not answer. Her mouth gaped open for a minute or two. With glazed eyes, she remained silent for a while before speaking again in unhurried murmurs:

"Once upon a time, at a certain place—"

These whispers were said in Japanese. Just now, the two of them had been conversing in Italian, but Lucretia suddenly spoke in Japanese.

Godou jumped in surprise. Could it be that she had received an oracle via spirit vision?

Although not reaching Mariya Yuri's level of attainment, Lucretia was also a spirit vision user.

"....."

Godou stared intently at the witch's beautiful face, waiting for her. However, Lucretia suddenly resumed her usual expression of lethargy, exhaling.

"Unfortunately, that's all. But this is quite a first. Obtaining a spirit vision regarding the 'King of the End'..."

Speaking of which, could the word 'Argo' be the crucial key?

Also, there were Lucretia's quiet whispers just now. Somewhere once upon a time. *A long time ago*. What meaning did these words hide within them?

Difficult to deduce. While Godou was troubling over these thoughts, Lucretia said to him:

"Young man, although right now, this is merely a subconscious feeling... When the time comes for a showdown against the 'King of the End,' perhaps you may possess an element of advantage."

"What do you mean by that?"

"The sword's spell words, controlled by Verethragna's final incarnation—the weapon of the [Warrior]."

This was probably an oracle via spirit vision as well. Lucretia spoke solemnly.

"The king manifesting at era's end is a deity who hides his name insistently. If the origin of his true name could be elucidated, then turning that knowledge into a blade... The sword's spell words might possibly bring out far greater power than ever before."

"My... Verethragna's sword?"

"For those who hide their names, the most powerful blow is only possible to deliver if their true name is spoken. But of course, the battle cannot be won simply through this alone."

After that, Godou took his leave from Lucretia's residence.

He rejoined his two companions outside. However, the helicopter that had transported them here had already returned to the Cagliari area.

"We need to arrange for transportation to get back. I've contacted fellow members of the [Copper Black Cross] and asked them to drive over. Also, I'm going to buy some food and drink."

As soon as Godou met up with her, Erica explained while holding a cellphone in one hand.

Lucretia's residence was located at the very edge of town. There were no shops or other residences nearby. Erica started walking towards a relatively busier part of the tiny Oliena.

Before leaving, she signaled with her eyes to Godou, probably asking him to keep an eye on Doni.

Thus, Godou was now alone with Doni, just the two of them.

Sardinia's blue sky stretched endlessly overhead. The weather was sunny today.

Although the winter wind was quite chilly, thanks to the sunlight, it was within toleration. More importantly, there was no snow in the vicinity.

Lucretia's residence was built next to a mixed forest.

But apart from this patch of mixed forest, the surroundings consisted of wide open plains.

If it were spring, this area would probably be covered with blooming flowers of various colors. Seeing Doni strolling on this plain at an unsteady pace, Godou had no choice but to follow.

"But investigations are really such difficult things."

"I'm sure Gascoigne will probably be furious if he heard the word investigation coming from your mouth."

Doni's nonsense was met with Godou's cold reception.

It was only a hunch, but Godou felt that the capable Alexandre Gascoigne would probably hate Salvatore Doni and his foolish airs . Indeed, just like how Kusanagi Godou kept calling this man an idiot and felt very incompatible with that eccentric nobleman as well.

However—enduring this feeling of wanting to click his tongue, Godou secretly felt well-matched.

(The things this guy does, ended up not being completely futile or useless...)

Today, Godou had paid Lucretia a visit due to getting dragged out here on account of Doni.

As a result, even though it relied on Doni's beginner's luck, nevertheless, this was precisely what led Godou to pass the goddess Circe's hint onto the Witch of Sardinia, thereby obtaining that spirit vision—

It was possible that Lucretia might have obtained the same oracle even through communications via phone or mail.

But it was also possible she might not.

In that case, Doni's seemingly foolish actions succeeded in drawing out a hint that brought them closer to the truth of the " King of the End" mystery. In a certain sense, such beginner's luck was quite fitting for one of the Campiones, the illegitimate children of Epimetheus.

"Oh my, could it be that you've got something to tell me, Godou ?"

"No way in hell. Stop looking for weird excuses."

"Oh right oh right, since Erica Blandelli isn't here, why don't we run away? Since we came all the way to Sardinia, it'd be too boring

if nothing's accomplished. Let's go find gods worthy as our opponents, or start a journey of investigation—"

"After all that trouble to get back to this side, don't go causing commotions the same way as what you did in Gaul!"

"No no, you've got things backwards. I simply brought my modern ways over to the past. Since it's you, I'm sure you can understand, right?"

"What does that have to do with anything!?"

"Then to commemorate our return to the present, let's duel decisively a number of times."

"Like hell anyone wants to duel! I've already had enough showdowns between you and me. For the rest of my life, I'm fine with exiting the stage with my victory!"

"Are you saying you don't want a fight with Salvatore Doni in tip-top shape? During the duel in Gaul, I was quite exhausted after getting possessed by Artio."

"Shut up. Adjusting your physical condition during battle is also a part of competency!"

While the two were engaged in a dialogue lacking in the solemnity of Devil Kings...

They suddenly stopped talking at the same time. A presence—Both of them noticed a presence that only Campiones could sense, being godslayers.

Then Doni smiled lightly.

"It must be my lucky day? Looks like coming all the way here was worth it."

"I really feel a bit jealous that you can feel lucky about this kind of situation."

After grumbling, Godou felt the blowing of wind.

The cold and freezing wind of winter, blowing from a certain direction. Even when this gust of cold wind swirled before the two Devil Kings to form a cyclone, then taking on human form, they were not surprised.

Because the two of them had already entered a state of combat readiness, in both body and mind, having sensed a Heretic God's presence.

Nevertheless, Godou was deeply astonished when he saw the wind god's appearance. Even Doni whistled briefly in surprise.

Tall in stature. Wrapped all over in white strips of cloth. Clad in armor.

In addition, the red mask obscuring the face—Only the eye portions were pitch black.

"The wind god we met in Gaul!?"

"Ehe. Looks like it's time for a greeting of 'Haven't seen you for fifteen hundred years!' or something like that."

For Godou and Doni, the battle against this wind god only felt like it took place two months earlier.

However, since the masked war god had continued to exist from fifth-century Gaul all the way to now, this could definitely be described as a reunion after one and a half millennia.

Godou was rendered speechless by the excessively surprising encounter.

However, there were even more astonishing things waiting for him. A young girl appeared deftly from behind the wind god. She looked about twelve or thirteen in age.

Her beautiful silver hair looked as though infused with droplets of moonlight.

Those eyes were more pitch-black than darkness, shining with luster akin to that of a pure-black gemstone.

She was dressed in a simple white robe of Greek style. The staff held in her slender right hand exhibited the form of a " double-headed snake."

However, what caught Godou's eye more than anything else was—

"...It's Athena!?"

Her beautiful face. It was completely identical to that of the goddess who had passed away in Japan several months earlier.

"Nay. One is not Athena."

The silver-haired beauty murmured haughtily. Even her tone of voice was indistinguishable from that of the goddess.

"'Tis meet for thee to address one as Pallas Athena, mine enemy of ill fate."

Part 7

"'Twas said that the Witch Queen formerly existing in these lands was called Guinevere. One hath succeeded her legacy to become the present generation Witch Queen. Oneself and ye are now acquainted henceforth."

"So in short, a Divine Ancestor huh..."

Gazing unerringly at the greatly surprised Godou, Pallas Athena continued:

"Exhausting the arts of magic in search of godslayers nearby... A rather surprising result. One did not expect to encounter mine enemy of ill fate this soon."

"Ill fate?"

Divine Ancestors were not supposed to retain memories from their previous lives—as goddesses.

Precisely because of that, Guinevere repeatedly failed in her search for the "King of the End." However, it was unbelievable that this Divine Ancestor, who looked identical to Athena, actually remembered Kusanagi Godou...?

Feeling intrigued, Godou asked:

"Your cause of death was from the Divine Sword of Salvation sucking your life away, right? If that's clearly the case, why do you serve the 'King of the End'? Shouldn't you bear a resentful grudge against the 'King of the End'!?"

"Verily indeed... Nevertheless, such is the existence known as the Divine Ancestor."

Even when faced with Godou's accusatory questioning, Athena still smiled haughtily at him.

"Dost thou know? Those known as Divine Ancestors all came about as the end state of mother earth goddesses whose lives were taken by the sword of salvation... Having lost their lives to the divine sword, goddesses of the earth then reincarnate into Divine Ancestors, worshiping as their lord the king who manifests at era's end. But certainly, 'tis true."

Pallas Athena's lips were twisted as though in self-mockery.

Godou jumped in surprise. The pride residing in her smile had shifted slightly towards valor—That was the impression he felt.

"'Tis unknown whether the word 'grudge' can be admitted... But no matter, this shall be put aside for now. More important is thee, godslayer of the east."

There were currently two Campiones present.

However, Pallas Athena ignored the frivolous Italian young man, only staring intently at Kusanagi Godou alone. The fighting spirit, nobility and pride residing in her eyes were all identical to that of the goddess Athena—

Godou quietly looked back at the young girl in turn.

Probably trying not to be left out, standing by Godou's side, Doni opened his mouth—

However, the masked war god took an extremely rapid step towards Doni in this instant. It was almost akin to a declaration of "One shall be thy opponent!"

Doni smiled happily as he looked at the war god while keeping his silent gaze on his opponent.

Ignoring the minor disturbance, Pallas Athena smiled mysteriously.

"When reincarnating upon the earth, Divine Ancestors shall lose the memories from their past lives... as deities. One is no exception. Be that as it may, this violent passion burns within the very depths of one's soul."

"Passion?"

"Forsooth. A mortal enemy existeth whom one must defeat, mayhap. As much as awakening the weary hero is one's mission, here existeth ill fate wherein even this mission paleth in comparison."

Placing her fist upon her slim chest, Pallas Athena murmured thus.

"Namely, one's destiny is to defeat thee."

"...No, you've got it wrong."

Her lips twisted into a savage grin as Godou spoke quietly.

He had understood through the exchange just now. Perhaps Athena was undoubtedly revived as a subordinate under the " King of the End." Nevertheless, even after becoming a Divine Ancestor, that goddess's core nature and soul most likely remained unchanged.

"It's the opposite. I'm the one who's going to defeat you. That's the promise. I owe that goddess a great favor, so I must repay her properly!"

"Oho."

Pallas Athena smiled savagely again as she narrowed her eyes.

"'Tis clear now. Thou hast lost against one in the past."

"True, that's not a wrong way of putting it. There are all sorts of circumstances between us."

"Understood. That is to say, bonds of ill fate hath formed between thee and oneself, transcending life and death. 'Tis meet to interpret so, mayhap? —In that case, one shall inquire of you, godslayer. Pray tell, what thine appellation mayeth be?"

"Remember this well. I am Kusanagi Godou."

Godou answered the Divine Ancestor who bore the proud face of the war goddess.

Pallas Athena raised her voice and shouted, as though savoring his name:

"Very well! In that case, listen well, Kusanagi Godou, as well as the other godslayer present hither. As one connected to the Devil King-slaying hero, Divine Ancestor Pallas Athena hereby issueth a declaration of war to the two of ye!"

This declaration of war came from the lips of the valorous queen.

"Well then. Pray tell, will ye accept this side's challenge!?"

"Since you've made things so clear, it's impossible to refuse."

Even faster than Godou, this time it was Salvatore Doni who spoke.

A happy grin hung on his face. However, he opened the cylindrical case that had been slung on his shoulder all this time, taking out the longsword hidden within. This was preparation for battle.

"I never thought that right when I start investigating the 'King of the End,' I'd run into his subordinates. Let me accept this challenge gratefully. Show me your power!"

Saying that, the blond Campione chopped at the wind god before him.

A diagonal slash aiming to cut the enemy from shoulder to hip. Furthermore, Doni's right hand was shining with silver radiance. Using the authority of the magic sword, he intended to slice everything into two.

In response, the god known as the Wind King suddenly manifested a great blade in his right hand.

Using this blade, the masked war god redirected Doni's slash. A wise move, considering that an attempt to block would likely result in his body getting sliced through together with the great blade. This also made one fact clear.

The "Wind King" still remembered Salvatore Doni's magic sword.

"How amazing. I can't believe you still remember an opponent you fought a thousand five hundred years ago. As expected of a god."

Feeling impressed for a weird reason, Doni lowered his right arm.

The tip of his blade pointed at the ground. Of course, rather than abandoning the fight, he was entering his stance for the sword of mental nothingness. Using this undisciplined standing posture, Doni unleashed an upwards slash!

Confronted with the magic sword, slicing diagonally from below, the "Wind King" moved the great blade in his hand—throwing it away.

He abandoned his weapon quite readily.

"!?"

The one who felt surprised was Godou, not Doni.

Responding without thought towards whatever the enemy did, no matter what, he swung his sword completely naturally.

This was precisely the true value possessed by the sword of mental nothingness.

Consequently, Doni continued to show a cheerful expression on his face while swinging the magic sword, intending to cut the " Wind King" from the left flank up to the chest, severing the right shoulder completely.

But at the very last moment, the "Wind King" blocked Doni's magic sword with his left arm.

Clang! The sound of steel striking steel. Indeed, hidden behind the mask and the strips of cloth wrapping the entire body, he or possibly she was a hybrid of a wind god and a sword god, thus possessing a steel-like body.

The "Wind King" stopped Doni's magic sword using his left forearm.

But the price paid was a slice penetrating the left arm, two thirds of the way deep.

Godou had witnessed the same battle situation in ancient Gaul one and a half millennia earlier. But this time, the "Wind King" instantly used his right hand to chop at Doni's magic sword.

Crash! A sound akin to that of shattering glass.

It was the sound of Doni's longsword shattering, falling on the ground in the form of countless metal fragments.

If the enemy was using a body possessing the hardness of steel, even ordinary punches and kicks could serve as substitutes for sure-kill moves from a sacred sword. In a certain sense, this manner of counterattacking greatly befitted the war gods of steel, the embodiments of swords and blades.

"You're a lot different from before!"

Discarding the hilt remaining in his hand, Doni swiftly retreated backwards.

The swift and agile "Wind King" pursued but suddenly halted.

Seeing his opponent's reaction, Doni smiled happily. The King of Swords was not only a master of swordsmanship but also martial arts techniques across the board with the unarmed arts of juujutsu above all.

Pursuing to attack without a sword would lead to getting counterattacked.

Seeing through this point, the "Wind King" ignored Doni's lure.

The masked war god was most likely a martial artist rivaling Salvatore Doni. This was evident from those movements.

Having both lost their weapons, the two opponents faced off, maintaining a separation of several meters.

Doni was in an unguarded state with his back arched mildly, both arms lowered.

However, this sword guru of a man was capable of transforming myriad martial techniques into powerful assets. Hence, he was even more scary when without a stance.

Hence, the "Wind King" clenched his right fist and turned his right hand towards Doni.

This was a stance that seemed to use the fist like a sword. Was the god trying to exhibit martial arts such as unarmed fighting or boxing—?

The instant just as the two martial artists were about to start an unarmed battle...

"Time to desist, 'Wind King.' Naturally, thy splendorous valor is the trump card capable of defeating everything... But at this time, there are other heroes who ought to be introduced to the godslayers."

Orders issued by Pallas Athena. The "Wind King" immediately lowered his fist.

In the next instant, the hybrid god of wind and steel transformed into a whirlwind, his figure disappearing. Seeing him retreat so simply, Godou nodded instead.

"I see now... If that guy is the only bodyguard, then there aren't enough opponents for us."

Pallas Athena was a Divine Ancestor and at the same time, also the Witch Queen in possession of transcendental powers.

But she probably did not wield sufficient power capable of rivaling gods or Campiones. Just as it was the case for the previous Witch Queen, Guinevere.

Of course, it would be a different matter if the seal of dragons and snakes were to be released, thereby recovering a mother earth goddess's divinity.

However, that was a trump card that could only be used in exchange for one's life.

Logically, it was not something that could be used recklessly. That said, if she really did possess Athena's soul, then under conditions when it was necessary, she would surely take on a serpentine or draconic form without hesitation...

In any case, *now* was not the time yet. Feeling certain of that, Godou said:

"Where are the guys you want us to meet?"

"Hahahaha! I'm already here!"

A cheerful and manly voice descended from the heavens.

The instant he heard this voice, Godou immediately broke into a run, driven by an instinctive warning that "Staying here any longer will be very dangerous!" To distance himself from Pallas Athena, he sprinted at full speed.

Immediately, dozens of arrows descended where Godou had been standing previously!

Taking a sideways glance at the great number of arrows embedded in the ground, Godou had escaped disaster by the slimmest of margins. Furthermore, the other Campione was also taking strange action at the same time.

"Ohoh!?"

Suddenly startled, Doni swiftly jumped backwards.

He moved as though he were evading someone's attack. But there was no one in front of Doni—no wait, the blond Campione was still continuing to dodge left and right, repeatedly evading someone's attacks.

His evasive movements looked like he was fighting an unseen enemy and dodging incoming attacks.

Still, Godou understood quite well that Salvatore Doni was a user of the mind's eye, capable of seeing through divine speed. Instinctively, Godou felt that Doni was probably using this skill right now.

Doni's attacker was a user of divine speed—impossible for ordinary people to capture with their eyes!

In actual fact, a figure was currently jumping around Doni's vicinity, wielding some kind of object, moving at super high speed .

Furthermore, judging from the silhouette of the object, it felt like some sort of pole-shaped weapon.

"Use this!"

"Haha, thanks!"

Godou instantly called out to him. Smiling, Doni extended his right arm towards Godou.

Godou clicked his tongue, quite displeased that Doni could understand what he meant without the need for explanations, when clearly they were not on intimate terms at all.

But right now, there was no leisure for grumbling. Instead, Godou summoned:

"Ama no Murakumo! Fight alongside that guy for now!"

'Affirmative!'

Accepting orders, the divine sword residing in Kusanagi Godou's right arm, Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi, suddenly manifested in Doni's right hand.

The gently curving blade measured three feet, three and a half inches. Whether in blade design or construction, it greatly resembled a Japanese sword. However, the blade itself was exuding a jet-black and mysterious aura of calamity.

"Since I have this, there's nothing to be afraid of!"

With both hands, Doni adjusted and firmed his grip on the reinforcements Godou had sent.

Next, he swung Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi horizontally. Immediately, an acute "clang!" resounded, an impact between metal and metal.

The same, unnatural noise was also produced in his earlier showdown against the "Wind King."

Ama no Murakumo had splendidly blocked the pole-shaped weapon belonging to the figure moving at divine speed.

At the same time, the wielder of the metal staff also stopped moving at last, finally allowing Godou to witness his appearance. However, Godou was no less surprised than when Athena made her entrance.

"The Great Sage Equaling Heaven!?"

"Indeed. It's been a while, Kusanagi."

The metal pole Doni had blocked was the famous Ruyi Jingu Staff.

Jumping about like lightning with divine speed, this monkey king was indeed the Great Sage Equaling Heaven, Sun Wukong. Over his yellow battle outfit was leather-crafted gear consisting of gauntlets, greaves and a breastplate.

Laughing merrily, this [Heretic God] was supposed to have perished on the plains of Senjougahara in Okunikkou.

In addition, a winged white horse descended from the heavens, accompanied by the sounds of massive wings flapping.

Pegasus of Greek legend, which Godou had also witnessed before at Naples. Furthermore, Godou clearly remembered the rider sitting astride the winged horse—

"Hohohoho. How embarrassing. For a formerly dead body to return so shamelessly in this manner..."

Dressed in a white outfit, the winged horse's rider was holding a longbow.

He was the one who had fired upon Godou earlier. A handsome face that gave no impression of cowardice despite its exquisite beauty and a head of lustrous, blond, wavy hair. These two characteristics both belonged to Perseus.

During summer last year at Naples, Godou had fought a deadly battle against this ancient Roman hero.

Speaking of which, Godou seemed to recall someone saying something like "Perseus slain"—

"Aha, I remember you're that guy, from that time!"

"Hoho. Quite some care I've received from you, godslayer of the magic sword. Apart from Kusanagi Godou, I must properly repay you as well."

Doni stared wide-eyed for he had exited the stage at Naples a long time ago.

Glancing sideways at him, Perseus ordered his steed to flap its wings in descent, finally landing on the left side of Pallas Athena.

Hence, the Great Sage Equaling Heaven also jumped back from Doni and landed on the Witch Queen's right.

"How now? Sharp are the swords left behind by the former Witch Queen, are they not?"

Leading the two war gods who flanked her, Pallas Athena spoke.

A yellow medallion had appeared in her right hand at some point. Its color mixture belonged to that of an alloy of iron and gold.

"As the supreme sword god, the 'King of the End' possesseth the authority to turn his perished kin into his own weapons—substituting for bows and arrows, substituting for swords."

" "....." "

To think that he possessed that kind of authority in addition to the Divine Sword of Salvation.

Not only Godou but also Doni was staring speechlessly at the object in the Witch Queen's hand. On the medallion of iron and gold, three sword-shaped emblems were carved on its surface.

"This [Arrowhead's Discus] is precisely the vessel for storing the authorities of summoned sword gods. Fufufu, this treasure, passed down in secret between successive generations of Witch Queens, one shall now make use of it."

Confronted with the happily smiling Pallas Athena, Godou gasped.

Speaking of which, he recalled someone telling him to "beware of the king's arrowhead." Probably because of that, he had started feeling a sense of foreboding as soon as he saw arrows shooting at him just now.

Godou felt as though a great threat was looming near, but there was no helping it.

What exactly was it? Just as he was feeling doubtful, Godou noticed something. By the time he noticed, the sky had filled with thunderclouds and he could now see the bright flashes of lightning amidst them.

He understood now. Now that so many characters had gathered here, surely that *opponent* must come too!

"Ama no Murakumo!"

While Godou called out, lightning also descended from the sky at the same time.

The jet-black divine sword disappeared from Doni's hand, manifesting in Godou's right hand instead. Instantly, Godou lifted the divine sword towards the sky while invoking the [Bull] at the same time, Verethragna's fifth incarnation.

This incarnation of unparalleled monstrous might was only usable when facing opponents surpassing human strength.

Naturally, there was no problem this time.

Descending rapidly with lightning speed, the enemy was a flying knight charging through the sky. The opponent's energy and penetrative power easily satisfied the [Bull]'s conditions. Using the incarnation's monstrous strength, Godou raised Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi over his head.

This was to block the lance thrust from the female knight descending from the heavens.

"Yahhhhhhhhhhhh!"

"What wondrous joy to encounter you again, Kusanagi Godou! The man of this knight's destiny!"

Accompanied by lightning, the knight charging at the ground was a beauty with a head of gorgeous hair the color of honey.

Her short, sleek, soft hair felt refreshing. One with her steed, descending from the sky, she was clad in chain mail, armed with a barbed cavalry lance.

This very lance was thrust with the momentum and intention of piercing Godou's forehead with its tip.

Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi was able to block the attack by relying on the [Bull]'s monstrous strength. The instant the jet-black blade and the lance tip collided, Godou swung the divine sword in a wide, horizontal arc.

As a result, the lance, horse and female knight were deflected with a loud "Clang!"

Recovering balance in midair, she then landed behind Pallas Athena.

"Hmph. To think you were able to discern one's arrival. Truly sharp vision indeed."

"Since things have gotten to this point already, I was thinking you'd surely revive as well."

Saved for the moment at least, Godou panted as he replied.

Sitting astride the flying white horse, the female knight was Lancelot du Lac, of course.

"Well then. How now? Mine enemy of ill fate, Kusanagi Godou. And the other godslayer."

Now with even the Amazonian queen under her command as well, Pallas Athena announced sonorously:

"Together with these war gods, the 'Wind King' also standeth by in one's faction. For a declaration of war against the present generation of godslayers, such combat potential would be considered quite sufficient, yes?"

"Oh my. Definitely quite sufficient. So sufficient that I almost want to thank you."

In a rare moment, Doni was smiling wryly.

Although he was always talking about seeking strong foes, nevertheless, opponents of flawless caliber had now appeared in quick succession. This was probably the reason why he was showing a wry smile.

Seeing this reaction, Pallas Athena smiled.

"In that case, 'tis meet. Very well, pass these words to ye kin—the other godslayers. Anon, one shall head thither to the farthest ends of the east to undertake the revival ritual for the ' King of the End.' Defeat one before the ritual's end if there are any objections."

"What did you say!?"

In response to Godou's shock, the reincarnated Athena declared acutely:

"One hath been hesitating all this time. Whether one ought to vanquish mine enemy of ill fate first or to rouse one's master the hero. Then one hath decided. 'Twould be joyful if all shall be fulfilled."

"I can't believe you can be so carefree..."

Godou felt deeply surprised before realizing. From the start, Athena was a wandering goddess who willfully acted as she pleased, a ship steering according to the wind, a being who moved forward according to whim and fancy.

Rather, it would be better to say that this was very much in Athena's style.

In actual fact, the fortitude displayed in Pallas Athena's smile was also identical to that of the snake goddess.

"Adieu. One shall see you at the far ends of the east, godslayers!"

Pure white light enveloped Pallas Athena and the war gods.

This greatly resembled the brightness given off when Liliana used flight magic. As expected, surrounded by light, the gods instantly rose up into the air, flying towards the eastern sky.

Indeed. Towards the land where the "King of the End" still slumbered—the direction where the islands of Japan lay.

Part 8

"...That's what happened. This is the full story of Kusanagi-san's trip to Sardinia."

Amakasu reported the situation using his smartphone.

Receiving the report from Tokyo's Chiyoda ward was Sayanomiya Kaoru, a member of the History Compilation Committee's core leadership.

"What a grand display. Gathering all the strong foes from the past, it's almost like a movie version of a live-action superhero television series."

"Speaking of which, in the movies, it's the heroes who gather together."

"In that case, doesn't it fit perfectly? In order to vanquish the evil army of great Devil Kings like Kusanagi-san, the heroes of justice and the former goddess has teamed up."

"I see. That's quite true."

Despite the joking words, there was no laughter in Amakasu's voice at all.

More precisely, his tone of voice was mixed with sighs. Moreover, Kaoru's voice coming from the telephone did not carry her usual cheerfulness.

"Anyway, the current plan is to meet up with Kusanagi-san and Erica-san at the Pisa airport then return to Japan with everyone else. Although originally, I was planning to enjoy a week's holiday. "

"What a stylish thing to say when you're on a business trip funded by public money. Nothing less expected of you, Amakasu-san."

"Not at all. Getting proper rest for the body and mind during a heavy workload is a product of professional awareness."

Ending the heartwarming conversation with his direct superior, Amakasu hung up.

He was currently in the ancient castle hotel's lobby.

Mariya Yuri, Hikari, Seishuuin Ena and Liliana were also present. Everyone was ready to return home, travel carrying cases in hand.

"A serious situation has developed..."

Liliana was murmuring in worry.

Of course, the girls had learnt through Erica Blandelli the whole story about tracking down Salvatore Doni. Likewise for the reappearance of old enemies.

"Perseus, the Great Sage Equaling Heaven, Lancelot, Athena... Furthermore, there is the wind god seen in Gaul and the 'King of the End' as well. It really feels like the end of the world."

"How did this come about...?"

Hearing Liliana's laments, Hikari began to look depressed.

Meanwhile, Ena was gazing steadily at her fellow Hime-Miko. Ever since arriving at this lobby, the Mariya family's eldest daughter had remained silent with a blank expression.

As her childhood friend, the Hime-Miko of the Sword took her time before asking:

"Yuri, could it be that you saw something?"

"...Perhaps, I suppose one could say that. However, I cannot fathom at all what significance it might actually hold. That is why I am uncertain whether I ought to speak or not—"

Lacking in confidence while thinking over this matter, Yuri whispered softly.

Ena responded by requesting in a relaxed tone of voice:

"But Yuri, you only received the spirit vision after hearing about His Majesty's experiences, right? Whatever you saw, it's okay, just tell Ena first!"

"Rather than seeing something, actually, it consists of nothing more than a few ambiguous words surfacing in my mind."

"Words?"

"Yes. This is how it went: 'An evil dragon in the sea. The dragon summoned wind and clouds to blot the sky and sun. Lightning flashed to illuminate the sea. The king shot an arrow, piercing the dragon's chest—'"

"...A tale of dragonslaying? What could it possibly mean?"

Hearing the passage recounted by her fellow Hime-Miko, Ena felt perplexed.

Hikari and Liliana also listened to their conversation with great interest. Furthermore, even Amakasu went "Hmm?" in curiosity, frowning his brow.

Rather than originating from Yuri, those words seemed vaguely reminiscent from somewhere—

For some unknown reason, that was the impression garnered.

Afterword

Hello everyone, it's been a while. This is Takedzuki Jou.

This time's Volume 16 is the second short story collection after Volume 8... Oh well, rather than short stories, it would be more accurate to say that these two volumes are mostly composed of mid-length stories.

Compared to short stories, I actually like mid-length pieces more because I can add in all sorts of things.

This preference of mine has been thoroughly expressed.

Also, this time's *Appearance of Devil King and Knight*, *Roman Holiday, Late Night Edition*, *A Set of Three...?* and *Extra Story: The Illustrious Sage, True Lord Erlang* are the short stories printed in the booklets included with the first edition bonus materials of Volumes 1 to 7 of the anime DVDs and Blu-Rays. Also, *The Imprisoned Campione* and *The Rumored Campione* are works published in the specials corner of the Super Dash Bunko website.

The mid-length story at the end, *The Stirring of Heroes*, takes place after the events of Volume 15.

In fact, this Volume 16 was originally meant to be a complete collection of all the short and mid-length stories I've written in various places, to be published together with newly written content.

After finishing the work for Volume 15, I gathered up my stockpile of manuscripts...

"Eh? This content alone is enough to fill up an entire book's worth of pages!?"

That was the truth I discovered.

Hence, apart from the pages of newly written content, this volume ended up being published as a chronological collection of little stories dating from the spring when Kusanagi Godou became a Campione all the way until autumn.

...Speaking of which, every month in 2012, I was writing stories for the anime bonuses.

As a result, my stockpile of manuscripts yet to be collected in volumes had apparently accumulated far more than I imagined (sweat drop).

Also, apart from miscellaneous edits, no extra content has been added to previously released works.

The only exception is *Appearance of Devil King and Knight* which served as the bonus story for the anime's first volume, where roughly ten pages of content was added.

But rather than adding new content, the story simply reverted to the state of its initial draft.

This happened because back when I first submitted the intial draft to a member of staff who helped out in all sorts of affairs on the anime production side, I was asked the following: Too many pages, could you reduce the number a bit? That caused me to speculate: "Oh, it's probably because the story will be recorded in the bonus booklet, so there's not enough space."

Hence, several months later, I submitted a new version with ten pages of material cut out.

Then a sample of the anime's first volume was delivered into my hands. When I saw the booklet where the bonus story was published, I thought: "There should be enough space on paper of this size. Just add one more line of text onto each page and the initial draft would have fit!"

So I proceeded to negotiate with the editor in charge.

"There's no need to be concerned about the page count issue for the remaining bonus stories, right? After all, depending on editing, adjustments are possible."

Several months earlier, the editor in charge was still talking about page count restrictions but this time, he agreed readily.

...I hope it wasn't because of a recent conversation about how " the original author was burdened with additional work in order to clean up after the accidental mess caused by a certain editor..." (wry smile).

In any case, having obtained the freedom to decide the page count, I indulged my preference for mid-length pieces over short stories, thus splitting the *Extra Story: The Illustrious Sage, True Lord Erlang* into four separate releases.

Thanks to that, my earlier idea of "Kusanagi Godou vs True Lord Erlang" finally took form.

Oh my, since there are battle scenes in the plot, a page count restriction would really have posed a problem.

Well then. Included last in this volume, *The Stirring of Heroes* is the postscript episode taking place after Volume 15's ending, while being the next volume's prelude at the same time.

As for Volume 17's title, I'm thinking it'll probably be "The Hero's Name."

If possible, I hope everyone can be patient for a little while.

Translator's Notes and References

1. ↑ や is attached at the end of this, which is a verb suffix indicating hatred or contempt, which I can't find a good way of inserting in.
2. ↑ The capitalist class who own most of society's wealth and means of production.
3. ↑ In case you don't realize this, T = Takagi, S = Sorimachi, N = Nanami
4. ↑ Yamato Nadeshiko: Ideal Japanese woman according to old standards. Beautiful, elegant, subservient.
5. ↑ Kurizenzai: some kind of Japanese sweet made with soft beans and chestnuts
6. ↑ **Warabite-tou**(蕨): a sword used by the Ainu people which influenced the development of the katana.
7. ↑ **Son of Edo**: Edo was the former name for Tokyo which rose to prominence as the stronghold of the Tokugawa shogunate. Renamed Tokyo after the imperial family regained power and moved there, it became the new capital of Japan. In short, "son of Edo" refers to a native Japanese man born and raised in Tokyo.
8. ↑ **Tekiya**(的): itinerant Japanese merchants who, together with gamblers, were the predecessors to modern yakuza. [1]
9. ↑ **Illustrious Sage**(顕): taken literally, means to manifest while means sage or saint when used as a title but also carries the meanings of divine, holy, sacred.
10. ↑ **Oden**(お): a Japanese winter dish consisting of ingredients such as eggs, radish, konnyaku and fish cakes stewed in broth. Often sold from food carts and Japanese convenience stores during winter.[2]

11. ↑ **Hassou-no-kamae**(八): one of the five stances of kendo, an offensive posture with the sword pointing upright and the blade sloping slightly to the rear.[3]
12. ↑ Psalm 22:2
13. ↑ Psalm 22:3
14. ↑ **Sorcerer**(邪): note that the word "sorcery" is used in the *Campione!* universe to refer to evil magic. Hence, all sorcerers are evil by definition.